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March / April 2025

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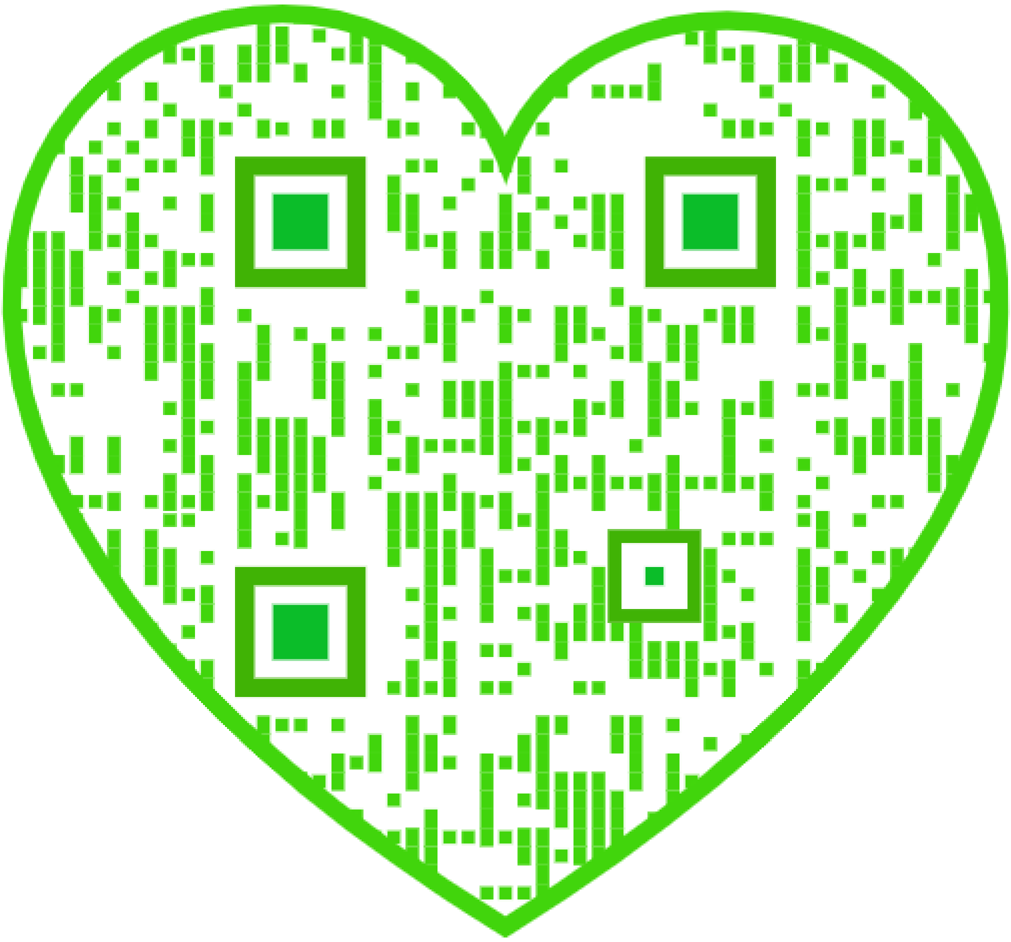

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Image: Tobias Ginsberg

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CYCLING'S SUPER SUNDAY

FREE SPEED! 16 Best Race-Day Upgrades
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COVER PHOTO
Riders leave Misty Cliffs behind, heading for Ocean View, on the Cape Town Cycle Tour.
Sam Clark / CTCT

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SA'S BEST-SELLING CYCLING MAGAZINE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS (AND THINGS THAT INSPIRED US DURING THE MAKING OF THIS ISSUE)

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PUBLISHERS OF *RUNNER'S WORLD* AND *BICYCLING*, AND INCORPORATING
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Image Jon Minster

What's your best Cape Town Cycle Tour memory?

"All the years I did the race ***with my dad****, and now the chance to do it* ***with my own kids****…"*
– JON MINSTER, EDITOR

"In 2018, riding with ***my 78-year-old dad, who was doing his first*** *Cycle Tour."*
– MIKE FINCH, PUBLISHER

"My ***first time coming down Wynberg hill****, riding the fastest I've ever ridden in a peloton until it was my time to lead the group and pull for as long as I could. What a thrill."*
– MARK ARENDSE, SENIOR DESIGNER

"Hours of hard work and racing Killarney every Wednesday night, to break 3 hours… then ***doing a 2:54 from E group*** *that year. Mission accomplished!"*
– PAUL GODDARD, AD GUY

*"****My first****, on the route over Ou Kaapse Weg, back in 2001. I had no expectations and loved every six-and-a-half hours of it! Second-best was* ***meeting Matt Damon*** *on the side of the road in 2009, with Francois Pienaar. It was one of the windiest Tours ever – we leapfrogged each other all the way, all struggling to stay upright!"*
– KIRSTEN CURTIS, ONLINE

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A FAMILY AFFAIR

SINCE I WAS A TEENAGER, the Cape Town Cycle Tour (which still sounds wrong, because it will always be 'the Argus') has been part of my family's circannual rhythm.

We lived in Joburg; and every March, like migrating birds, we'd flock to the Holiday Inn on Greenmarket Square in Cape Town. The place would be thronging with people in lycra, bikes in the elevators and nervous comments about the wind, which almost always tousled the palm trees outside.

I did my first Argus when I was 16 years old, in 1999. Unfortunately I don't have a photo from that event, but I do have one from my fourth tour, which I did in 2004 as an honours student at UCT.

I was a de facto Capetonian by then, living in digs, not as scared of the wind, and with that young-person belief that you can do anything on the day regardless of whether you've trained or not. (Or how many beers you drank the night before.) The photo shows me smiling (or grimacing) as I cross the finish line, with unkempt hair and aviator shades, wearing takkies and toe clips aboard my old Giant Iguana mountain bike with V-brakes and slick tyres.

Twenty years later, in 2024, I did my 21st Cycle Tour – the inaugural 42km short route – with my son Elliot, who was 11 at the time. This year I'll be lining up with him again as he attempts his first full lap of the Peninsula. I hope I'll be able to keep up!

Where have all the years gone? I'm getting a bit emotional as I scroll down the RaceTec results page, trying to remember where I was – *who* I was – as I lined up in the start chute each year.

There was the special year in 2010, when Cycle Tour Sunday coincided with my dad's 60th birthday. He dropped me at some point and I suffered on without him, mortified at being smoked by someone double my age, eventually finishing in four hours and 48 minutes. Later that evening we threw my dad a surprise party at Toni's on Kloof Street; all of his best mates had flown down from Joburg for the occasion. I was sunburnt and stiff, but the pain wore off as the sangria flowed, and the festivities carried on far too late for a school night.

Then there were the years I rode with Mike, my brother-in-law, and the years my sister joined; the time I raced a 3:33 on my vintage steel Sancini with down-tube shifters; and all the years that Jess brought our baby boys to the finish to cheer me over the line as if I'd just won the Tour de France.

I flipping love the Cape Town Cycle Tour. If you have even a passing interest in riding bikes, it's something you have to do at least once in your life – preferably more than once. It's one of the best events of its kind in the world, and it has kept my little family close over so many years. I have no doubt that thousands of other families have similar memories of riding with parents, children and friends – and making new friends along the route.

We hope you enjoy this issue, which celebrates the Cycle Tour in all its multifaceted glory. May the wind not blow on Sunday 9 March, and may the sun hide behind some clouds. If not, may you have stories to tell for generations to come!

Jon Minster

▲ JON AND HIS SON ELLIOT (11) IN 2024 AT THE START OF THE 42KM ROUTE; AND BACK IN 2004, LAUGHING NERVOUSLY AT HAVING MADE IT TO THE FINISH WITHOUT CRAMPING!

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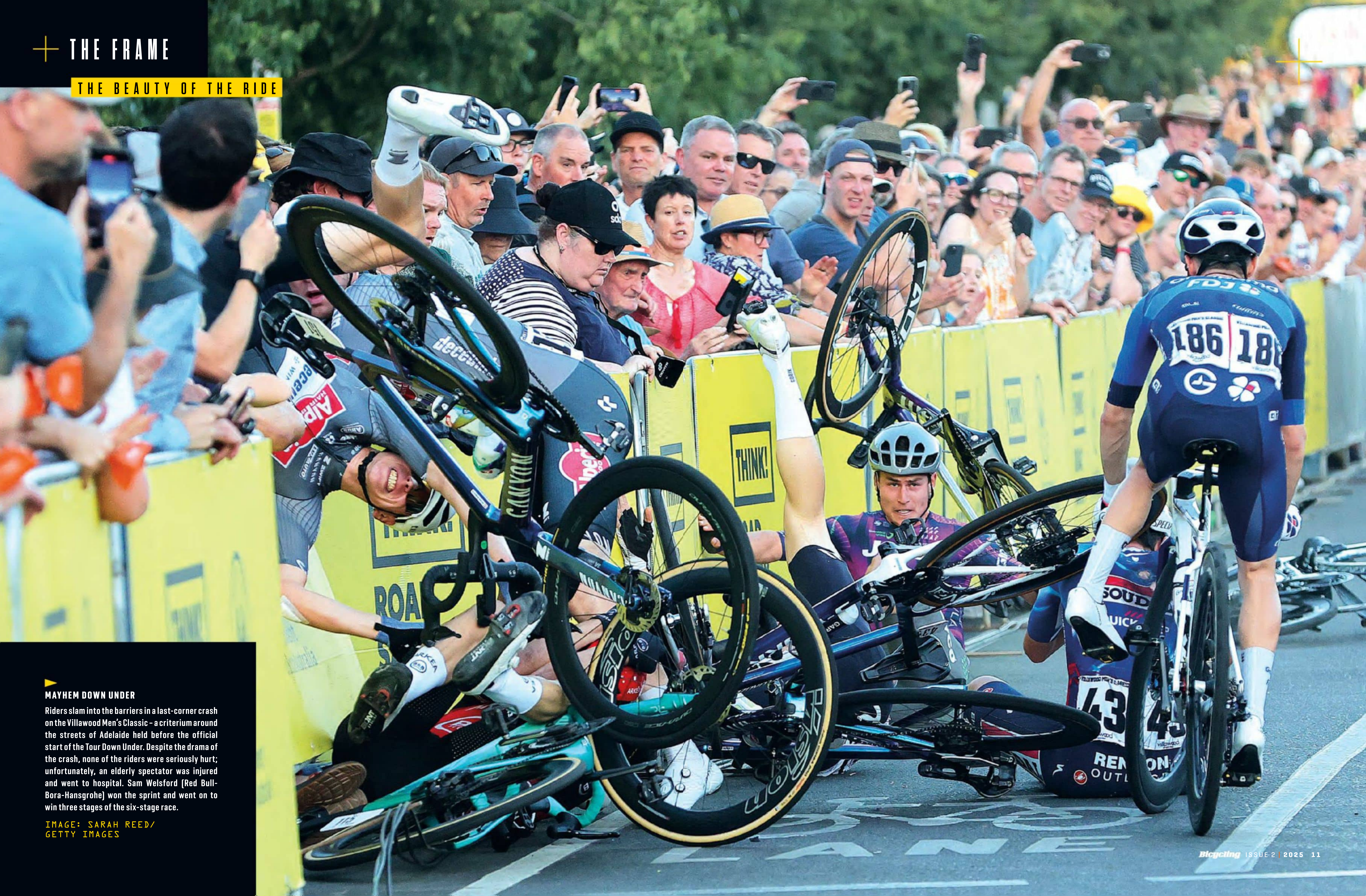

MAYHEM DOWN UNDER

Riders slam into the barriers in a last-corner crash on the Villawood Men's Classic – a criterium around the streets of Adelaide held before the official start of the Tour Down Under. Despite the drama of the crash, none of the riders were seriously hurt; unfortunately, an elderly spectator was injured and went to hospital. Sam Welsford (Red Bull-Bora-Hansgrohe) won the sprint and went on to win three stages of the six-stage race.

IMAGE: SARAH REED/
GETTY IMAGES

GUESS WHO?

Wout van Aert solos to victory at the Cyclocross World Cup in Dendermonde, Belgium, on 5 January. Conditions were brutal, with heavy mud turning the riders into anonymous watt-zombies. A month later, Van Aert lost out narrowly to his arch-rival Mathieu van der Poel at the Cyclocross World Championship at Liévin in France. That's three world champ titles for Wout; seven and counting for MVDP...

IMAGE: BILLY CEUSTERS/ GETTY IMAGES

ATTA BOYS!

The Attakwas Extreme, nicknamed The Hell of the South, takes riders from Oudtshoorn to Groot Brak via 121 hot, rocky and sometimes wet kilometres. Defending champ Alan Hatherly *[front]* was the pre-race favourite; and he delivered on his world champ status, distancing Tristan Nortje *[behind him]* with 40km left to race.

IMAGES: MAX SULLIVAN/ DRYLAND

IN DUST WE TRUST

The 2025 Ford Trailseeker series kicked off in January, in the Banhoek Valley outside Stellenbosch. Marco Joubert (Imbuko ChemChamp) won the elite men's category, and superstar Swiss rider Jolanda Neff (Cannondale Factory Racing) took home the spoils in the elite women's race. It was a scorcher of a day, with temperatures in the high 30s.

IMAGE: SAM CLARK/FACES

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AFRICAN GLADIATORS

After more than 1 200km and 20 000m of climbing in the Moroccan highlands, Namibian Drikus Coetzee *(left)* and SA's Kevin Benkenstein surge for the line in the final kilometres of the Atlas Mountain Race. Following a titanic struggle in which neither was able to drop the other, they crossed the finish line with their arms around each other for joint third place.

"In the last 60km, our attacks were pretty pathetic. I tried one and got to 220W, and I nearly fell off my bike," says Benky. "Drikus and I looked at each other, and we both knew a sprint in traffic coming into Agadir wasn't the right way to end it. Although I would have felt differently if it was for the win… There were one or two kickers left, and we accelerated – or tried to – but at 20km to go, we called things. We stopped for a Coke, and began processing what we'd achieved."

Briton Alex McCormack won the race, in a time of three days and 20 hours.

IMAGE: STEPHEN SHELESKY

By DAVID MOSELEY

▼ **PARTNERS IN WINE.** DAVID MOSELEY [SECOND FROM RIGHT] STOPS FOR 'REFRESHMENTS' ON THE 2020 CAPE TOWN CYCLE TOUR.

A GREAT TIME, NOT ALWAYS A *FAST* TIME

OFFICIALLY, I'VE COMPLETED 11 Cape Town Cycle Tours, but I think I've done closer to 14 (I rode a handful without the required timing chip). Most of them have been slow.

But not the one in 2018, when I 'raced' a time of 3h28…

I was lean. I was mean. My child had just been born. I was training with a friend who was doing the Cape Epic that year. I was in the cycling shape of my life; I was on top of the world. My finish that year was the climax to my journey from last place, in my first-ever bike race, to an incredible 4 157th in this, my 20th bike race.

But was it my *best* Cycle Tour?

Sitting here now and trying to place all the details, I actually couldn't remember a thing. I couldn't remember the weather; I couldn't remember if I had fun, or if I struggled, or who I rode with. I couldn't remember if I partied all night long after finishing, or if I collapsed in a heap on the couch.

I couldn't even remember what colour socks I wore on the day, which for a cyclist is the equivalent of a mother forgetting her child's name.

Then I remembered that Action Photo stores event images for about 90 years. "The photos will remind me of all the fun I had on the day!" I reasoned, plugging the relevant info into the search bar. Except that the images showed no fun being had at all. In the 18 watermarked images of yours truly from Cycle Tour 2018, I look mopey on Main Road, miserable in Misty Cliffs, peeved on Chapman's Peak, sulky on Suikerbossie and downright furious at the finish.

THE TOURS I REMEMBER MOST FONDLY ARE THE ONES WHERE MY TIMES WERE TERRIBLE, BUT I WAS HAVING A GREAT TIME.

And then it *did* all come back to me…

What actually happened, in 2018, was that I sat in the hurt locker for 109km – riding beyond my ability in bunches I had no desire to be in, with serious cyclists chasing serious times, and then finally cramping, with about 3km to go. (Which explains my fury at the finish line.)

Other, better memories soon barged those out of my mind. I remembered my first Cycle Tour in 2009: windy, but full of laughs with old varsity mates. I remembered 2010, when I rode with my wife. I remembered taking it easy on the 'short one' in 2015; the drizzle of 2022 (and turning off at Tokai for some breakfast); riding with Chris and Jonno in 2023, and bombing along with Barry in 2024.

There was the one in 2020, just before Covid, when I pulled over for a sauvignon blanc tasting (or three) with the winemaker from Klein Constantia; and the post-Covid one in 2021 (my second-best time, interestingly), when the atmosphere was electric because people could Do Stuff Outside again.

You can see the pattern: the Tours I remember most fondly are the ones where my times were terrible, but I was having a great time. And that's the moral of the Cycle Tour story…

Sometimes your best time has nothing to do with time at all. ***B***

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As told to **DAVID MOSELEY**

THE VOICE OF CYCLING

GERALD DE KOCK, COMMENTATOR AND MOUNTAIN BIKER

GERALD DE KOCK JUST WANTED TO PLAY CRICKET. Then he wanted to study sports science at Stellenbosch University. But the universe has a habit of sending the best intentions along unmapped highways, and he was diverted to the world of cycling – via a 40-year-long commentary career that started in Potchefstroom, during a Western-Transvaal versus Boland Currie Cup rugby match.

To say it's been a journey for South Africa's undisputed 'voice of cycling' is an understatement. De Kock has been humming along on South African airwaves since 1985, covering everything from test match cricket to indoor hockey. Today, he's synonymous with cycling, even if some excitable mountain bikers still confuse him with fellow commentator Arnold Geerdts...

"I'd been playing cricket in the UK, then I was playing in Joburg for the Wanderers," De Kock says. "The Wanderers captain back then was Alan Wilkins, who had just finished playing county cricket and was working for the SABC on Radio Sport, the English-language service. Alan asked me to do a voice test, which I did; and then I was offered a job."

Having already been accepted into Stellenbosch University, De Kock sought the advice of a family friend – legendary commentator Charles Fortune. Fortune, who was a teacher before becoming a commentator, told De Kock to get his education first. "I then did the exact opposite, and accepted the SABC job!"

Fortune repaid this insolence, in a way, when he and De Kock were later paired together on a radio broadcast for a Currie Cup cricket match between the old Transvaal and Northern Transvaal. "Charles took the crossing and handed over to me," De Kock says. "Sylvester Clarke proceeded to hit Lee Barnard in the box with a delivery, dropping him to the floor. Barnard was down for about 10 minutes, and I had absolutely nothing to say!

"Charles just sat back with his arms folded, and left me to flounder. It was a very early lesson in how to be prepared."

I take my coffee... my *two* cups of coffee... in the morning, in bed, mostly prepared by me, alongside my wife and listening to the birds.

I'd love to go for a ride with Bruce Springsteen. I'm a tragic 'Boss' fan, and have been for many, many years. I went to all three of his shows in Cape Town. I don't even know if he rides a bike.

The secret to happiness is balance. Balance on the bike, and staying balanced in life; which for me means lots of things in moderation. Experience a rich variety of things; a bite of everything, so you never get bored.

My greatest exhilaration is arriving home after a long trip away. It's so lovely. I love that feeling of being grounded. It really makes me happy.

A moment of pure clarity was realising that I would have made an absolutely hopeless student, and I was so fortunate to land in the job that I have. After my very first broadcast I knew that this is what I should be doing. People say to me, "Oh, you're still doing this..." But I don't feel that way. I'm lucky to be doing something I love.

I am passionate about riding my mountain bike, here in South Africa.

When I wake up... it's mostly still dark! I rarely or cannot sleep beyond 6am. I wake up early every morning. And I love it, because it's coffee time. It's the best time of the day.

I rage against litter. Urgh. It really makes me mad when I see people littering, especially on the trails.

I wish I had discovered cycling when I was younger. I wish mountain biking had been around when I was a cricketer. I wouldn't have achieved anything spectacular, but I would have got on the bike a lot earlier in life. **B**

Image: supplied

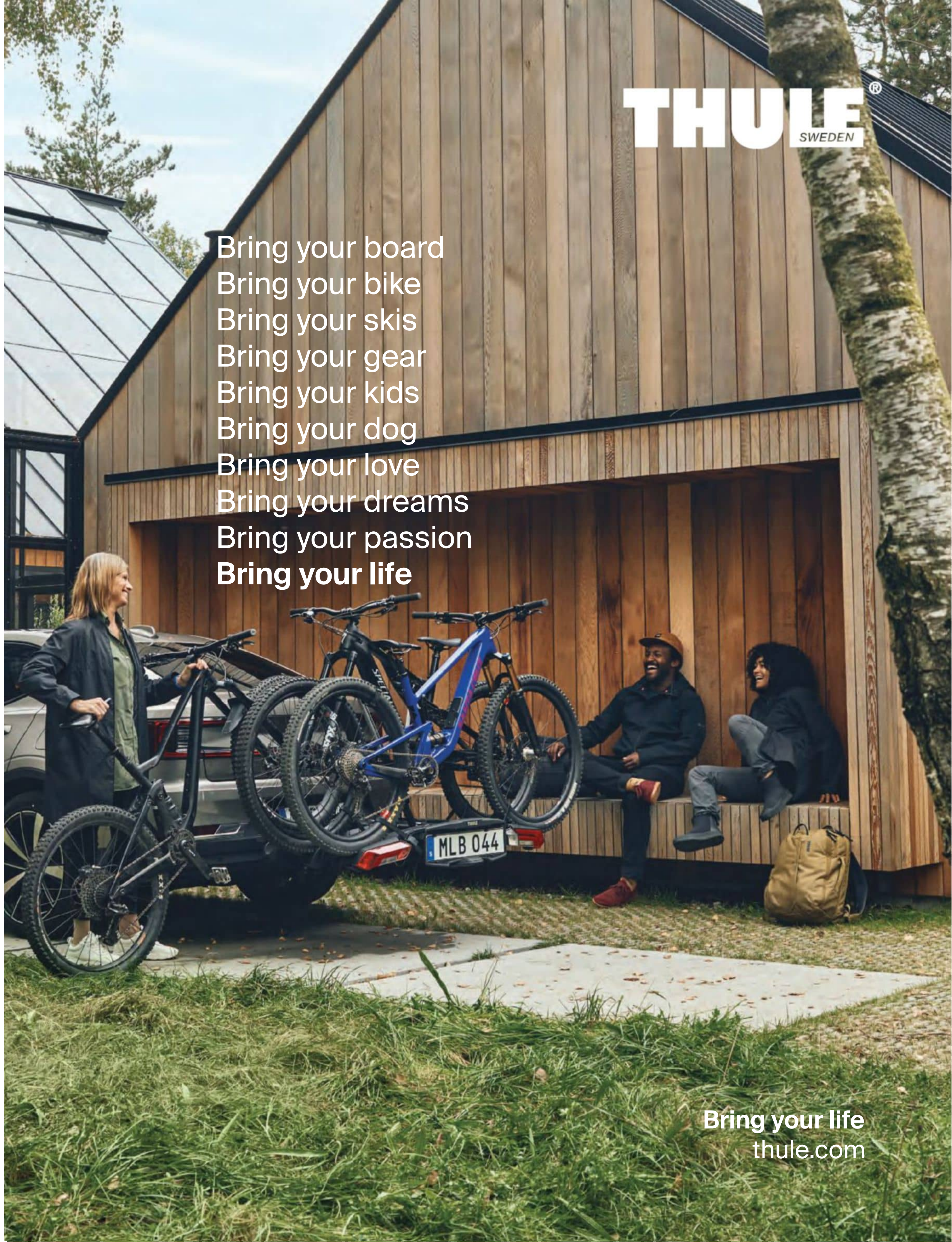

Illustration by Greg Kletsel

GETTING A FLAT CAN MAKE YOUR RIDE BETTER

BY PAVLÍNA ČERNÁ

ON A BEAUTIFUL LATE-SUMMER RIDE, under a clear blue sky… I got my second flat in three days.

As luck would have it, I was 30km from home. And stupidly, I'd forgotten to pack a repair kit.

What made me even more upset was that the ride was going so well. For the first time in weeks, my legs weren't aching as soon as I woke up, because I'd finally allowed myself to take a few rest days after overdoing my training for an upcoming half marathon.

As I started pushing my bike along the shoulder-less road towards the next suburb, I couldn't shake the thought that I'd jinxed my bike by recently boasting about never getting a flat before. Well deserved.

A couple of cyclists coming from the opposite direction crossed the road to ask if I was okay. They were sorry they didn't have a spare tube – as if my not having one was somehow *their* fault! I began contemplating whether I could convince an Uber driver to collect not only my sweaty self but also my bike, rather than bother any of my friends to pick me up.

Then a guy in a team jersey pulled over in front of me, snapping me out of further deliberations. "A flat?" he asked, stating the obvious, before directing me to a patch of grass past the ditch. Stubborn in my incurable insistence not to accept help from people I know – let alone strangers! – I stumbled over a series of unconvincing excuses for why I didn't need saving: I could probably find a bike shop down the road, or get someone to pick me up.

But the stranger had the flat tyre off before I'd finished the sentence. He was on a charity ride, he said, ahead of the others, so he welcomed the stop. Like a soundtrack incompatible with his well-rehearsed motions, I rambled about my previous flat, a slow leak that had taken me 45 minutes to fix, and how I must not have done a good job. He asked about my accent. I told him I was originally from the Czech Republic.

While inspecting my tyre, he pricked his finger on a tiny splinter. *Stupid me,* I scolded myself internally, *that's what I must have missed.*

"I'm so sorry about that!" I apologised out loud, looking anywhere but at the blood. But he just sucked on his fingertip without losing momentum, and focused on recalling the Czech town his ancestors had come from in the early 1900s. The pronunciation of his guess didn't sound like any place I know, but our shared roots got us to a first-name basis and turned the stranger into Alan all the same.

> MY SIGNATURE DISTRUST OF STRANGERS WAS DISMANTLED BY INNATE GOODNESS: PEOPLE GENUINELY WANT TO HELP.

A man in a car coming from the opposite direction pulled over, blocking traffic without a care in the world, and asked if we needed anything. "A better pump," Alan answered. "Mine is crap." The man didn't have one but said he could drive 10 minutes down the road to his son's place; as an avid cyclist, he'd definitely have one. I thanked him, saying I could get the pressure topped up at the bike shop, which by then I'd confirmed did exist in the suburb ahead (while staring into my phone instead of at Alan's finger). "No matter," the man said. "Good luck."

By then, Alan was putting the wheel back into the frame. He refused my attempts to give him cash for the tube, or at least pre-pay for his next coffee. Instead, he flipped the bike right-side up, said, "Here you go. It's nothing. Have a nice ride," and jumped back onto his bike. He was gone as quickly as he'd appeared.

I pedalled slowly towards the nearby bike shop – because of the mist in my eyes from how touched I was by Alan's kindness as much as the low pressure in my tyre.

If I thought my ride had been going well until then, getting the flat had actually made it better. Maybe – I hope – there are many Alans among cyclists; this being my first flat out in the world, I'm still new to this.

On that warm, breezy afternoon, my signature distrust of strangers was dismantled by innate goodness: people genuinely want to help, if only I'd let them. It reminded me of Kathrine Switzer, the first woman officially registered to run the Boston Marathon. She said that if you're losing faith in human nature, go out and watch a marathon.

And while I wouldn't wish it on anyone, I'd also add: try getting a flat on the side of the road. ***B***

Pavlína Černá, *Bicycling US's senior features editor, will never again leave the house without a spare tube.*

THE CASE AGAINST STRAVA

BY **TREVOR RAAB**

I'LL BEGIN BY SINGING SOME PRAISES. Without Strava, I'm not sure I'd have re-engaged with cycling at the level I did. Coming from just occasionally messing around on mountain bikes as a teenager to trying my best to race at an elite level, Strava has played a role in pushing me to ride faster, harder and longer than I'd ever done before.

However. Over the past few years, I've become disenchanted with social media in general. Platforms that once seemed good for my motivation and mental health became burdensome.

Strava was no different. Post-ride data-checking turned into mindlessly looking at what everyone else was doing, comparing stats, and ultimately getting annoyed by ego-fluffing ride titles and novel-length explanations of 'why I didn't win the race or get that KOM'.

I found myself hooked on those little dopamine hits that came with the handful of validating kudos and silly little comments. I started incessantly doomscrolling on Strava – I already have Instagram for that! Eventually, I began to feel disdain for the world I love so much. As a society, we have a deeper issue with social media consumption, and I really don't want cycling to be part of the problem.

That's not to say I downright hate Strava and think you shouldn't use it. All I'm proposing is that it's not a bad idea to take a break and focus on getting back to riding for yourself. But if you're still loving the social aspect of Strava, stick to it! If it's a motivator for you to keep on riding, don't let me stop the stoke.

Not using Strava doesn't mean I'm devoid of data or tracking. I use a cycling computer and smart watch to track my rides, as well as TrainingPeaks, with a coach, to plan and analyse my efforts after a race or workout. TrainingPeaks also functions as a journal where I keep notes on how I felt on different training rides and events.

You may still see me occasionally reappear on Strava to share a cool ride or experience. From time to time, I do use its incredible heat-mapping tool when building routes in new places. Plus, I enjoy having live segments show up on my computer every so often.

Some of these features, isolated from the social media noise, make Strava feel more like the tool I initially learned to love. But for the most part, my account serves as a dusty old locker filled with fond memories.

Strava and I will continue our limited relationship as I enjoy my rides the old-fashioned way – without the need for anyone's kudos but my own. **B**

Trevor Raab is Bicycling US's senior photographer. He's spent the last 10 years documenting cycling through images – and by logging plenty of data. Dialling back the data side of things has helped him remember the original reason he fell in love with bikes.

Illustration by Alana Johnson

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THERE ARE WAY TOO MANY BIKES TO CHOOSE FROM

BY **MATT PHILLIPS**

Illustration by Jamie Cullen

"PERFECTION IS ACHIEVED NOT WHEN there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."

In recent months, engineers from two different cycling brands have referenced this quote during our discussions about new products. It comes from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Airman's Odyssey*, though he is best known as the author of *The Little Prince*.

De Saint-Exupéry, however, seems to be riffing on the Latin phrase *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, or 'Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity'. This is a tidy encapsulation of the famous philosophical principle called Occam's Razor, which is attributed to William of Occam, a 14th-century English friar and theologian. Basically, it means that the best explanation for something is usually the one that is straightforward and avoids unnecessary complexity.

Like an earworm, De Saint-Exupéry's quote is stuck in my head. As I ride bikes and think about cycling equipment, it keeps rising to the fore. Ironically, both engineers we spoke to used this quote to describe the motivation behind incredibly complex products: one was electronically controlled wireless suspension, the other a carbon full-suspension mountain bike.

Bicycles are simple: two wheels connected in line by a frame. From there, we've modified, evolved, tweaked and tuned – always adding more and more. So much has been added, in fact, that the market is now flooded with overwhelming quantities of equipment, technologies and features. There's so much out there with so much overlap that browsing a bike shop or shopping online is an exercise in sensory assault.

I can find examples in any corner of cycling, but I'm going to use gravel bikes and equipment to highlight my complaints. Gravel is the 'newest' cycling category – which is hilarious in itself, because the first bicycles *were* gravel bikes. But anyway. These are drop-bar (though not exclusively) bikes primarily intended for use on non-paved road surfaces.

> THE BEST EXPLANATION FOR SOMETHING IS USUALLY THE ONE THAT AVOIDS UNNECESSARY COMPLEXITY.

Let's look at Specialized's gravel bike line. It consists of three families: the Crux, the Diverge, and the Diverge STR. (That's leaving out the e-bikes.) The Crux is the most basic: round tubes, external routing, no odd standards, no proprietary anything. The Diverge's standout feature is Specialized's FutureShock rider-suspending system in the head tube. The Diverge STR, by comparison, has rider-suspending systems at the front *and* rear of the bike.

These three distinct bike families are all designed for gravel riding; but supposedly, they serve the needs of different kinds of gravel riders. And each of those families has multiple builds, in some cases offered in two different frame materials. We don't get the entire range in South Africa, but in the US there are 33 different Specialized gravel bikes, each offered in multiple sizes and most in multiple colours.

Even though Specialized has so many different gravel bikes, I see an obvious hole in its gravel portfolio that I'm sure it will fill soon: a race bike with aerodynamic features, like Trek's Checkmate and Cabal's Project X. I hope Specialized addresses this by updating its Crux model, but I doubt that will happen. The bike industry seemingly prefers to fix shortcomings by addition; so I fear Specialized will plug the hole by adding a fourth gravel model.

If asked about the many different gravel bikes, I presume the marketing people at Specialized would say that they've 'listened to the riders' and they're inspired by how cyclists use their equipment. And I suspect they'll only launch products they believe will sell.

But by selling so many bikes, does Specialized offer solutions, or is the brand just adding complexity, which results in confusion for the rider? And let's not forget that Specialized is but one brand: the total number of gravel bikes available from brands big and small is mind-boggling. On the 99Spokes bicycle comparison website, there are about 7 800 gravel bikes listed in its database – not including e-bikes.

ON THE 99SPOKES BICYCLE COMPARISON WEBSITE, THERE ARE ABOUT 7 800 GRAVEL BIKES LISTED IN ITS DATABASE – NOT INCLUDING E-BIKES...

IT SEEMS THAT AS MUCH AS IT LIKES TO shout out De Saint-Exupéry and his Occam's Razor-inspired statement, the bicycle industry agrees more with William of Occam's nemesis, Walter Chatton. Chatton rejected Occam's philosophy of simplicity, and instead pitched his own anti-razor: "If three things are not enough to verify an affirmative proposition about things, a fourth must be added, and so on."

I understand that the basic tenets of capitalism are the rules of supply and demand; that market competition forces the inferior party to 'innovate or die' (to use a Specialized slogan), and thereby allows the cream to rise. But when so many similar products flood the zone, I'd argue that the chances increase of a buyer making an incorrect choice, or finding themselves frustrated because they feel talked into features they don't want. Or that they have no choice but to accept more bike than they need.

I have a role in all of this. It's my job to review equipment and provide criticism and insight, which presumably helps riders make more informed choices. But with so many gravel bikes on the market, I can't ride and review them all. It would be challenging for me just to ride and comprehensively review all of Specialized's gravel options before it makes significant revisions to the line. And I don't think there are enough cycling test editors on the planet to review all the gravel bikes available today.

I'm wise enough to know that some players welcome an information vacuum. It's easier to sell a substandard bike to a rider who doesn't know how a bike performs compared to the alternatives that exist. But I believe the greater risk is buyers' revolt: they get so overwhelmed by all the bikes that seem so alike that they end up sticking with what they know for fear of making the wrong choice. Or they recognise that piling on features they can't or won't use isn't the same as providing a bike that offers performance and functionality.

So far, I've stuck to bikes, but there are endless cases in other gravel-oriented product categories: Panaracer's 2024 GravelKing tyre line consists of 17 different tyres, each of which comes in several different widths, and in some cases, two diameters. POC's website returns 27 results tagged 'gravel helmet'.

These are just two examples from one brand each – and for the record, I don't know what a 'gravel helmet' is. Zoom out to the entire industry's product offerings and the numbers increase exponentially. There are also gravel shoes, apparel, and somehow, saddles. And this is just one small niche of cycling. I believe the world doesn't need all this gravel-specific gear.

HERE'S WHAT I KNOW ABOUT HUMANS: we each have our own special interests. Consumerism has taught us to expect that not just our needs but also our desires must be met down to a cellular level. At least some of the reason Specialized offers 33 different gravel bikes is the fear that if it doesn't make a bike that's W, X, and Y and also a bike that's X, Y, and Z (largely similar, but minutely different), then customers will buy from the brand that does.

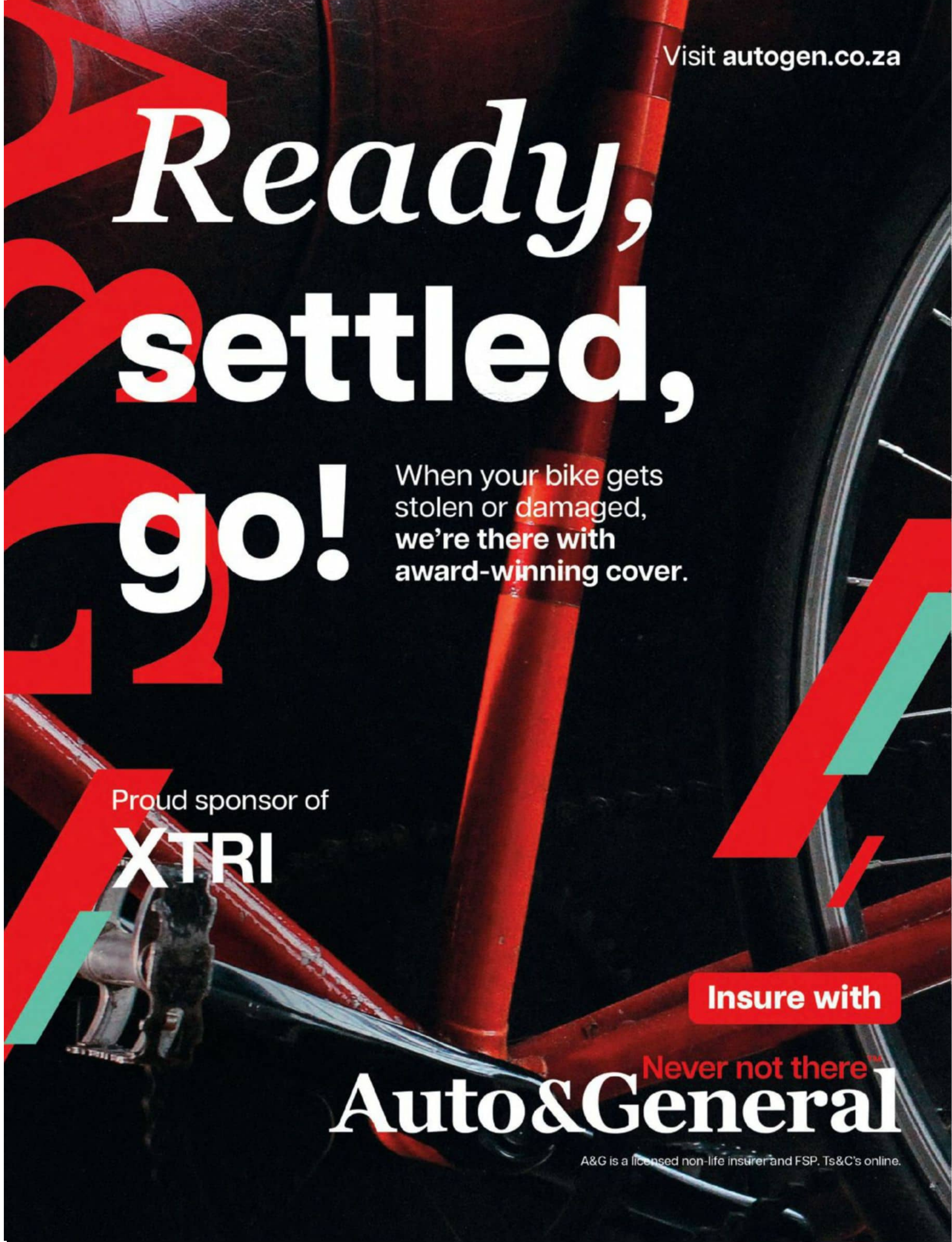
So, I blame us as much as I blame them.

I'm also not advocating that we all ride the same gravel bike and tyres, or wear the same helmet. I welcome choice and diversity when there's a purposeful distinction.

But a purposeful distinction doesn't come from colouring something matte khaki and calling it 'gravel'. It doesn't come from slicing a slice into more and thinner slices. Those actions only create confusion and waste, and cyclists don't like those things.

I say the following with no expectation that anything will change, but I say it nevertheless: we all need to embrace the beauty and perfection of cycling's simplicity. ***B***

Matt Phillips is Bicycling's senior test editor, and has been forever. He loves to ride and wrench on bikes and always strives to learn more about them. But he's most fascinated by how riders interact with and perceive the bike they're riding, and how those things drive what riders desire from their equipment.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WORDS & PICTURES: JACQUES MARAIS

OVERBERG MEANDER

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE IN THE ROLLING HILLS OF THE SOUTHERN CAPE.

IF YOU'RE CURIOUS ABOUT TOURING on two wheels, the Overberg Meander is like a gateway drug. Once you've done this amazing and accessible route, you'll just want to do more and more.

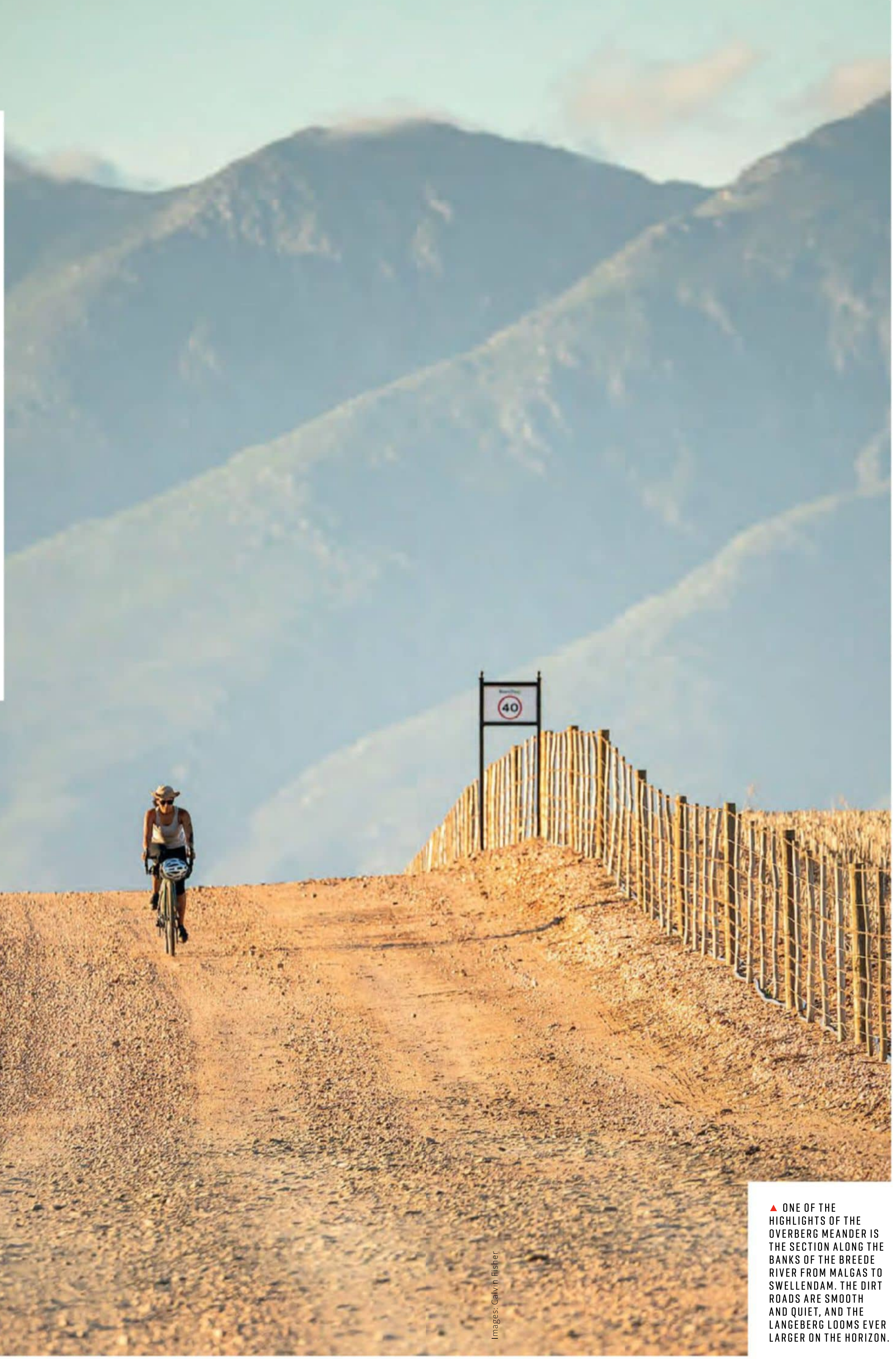
The Meander links the fruit-growing valley of Elgin to the historical town of Swellendam, taking in the Breede River and Cape Agulhas – the southernmost tip of Africa. There are great places to stay in the towns along the way, and you'll experience a variety of landscapes: rolling canola fields, fynbos-clad mountains, old-growth forests, empty beaches and quiet gravel roads. Highlights include the vineyards of the Hemel and Aarde Valley behind Hermanus; the flowing gravel of the Klein River Valley outside Stanford; the windswept roads dipping towards Africa's southernmost tip; the hush of De Hoop Nature Reserve, and the aloes along the Breede River all the way to Swellendam.

The entire Meander is about 360km long, with 3 821m of elevation in total. You can carve it up however you like; ultra racers could do it in a day or two, but it's far more enjoyable to take it slow and give yourself time to appreciate your surroundings. We recommend riding 60-70km per day and doing the route over five days, which will allow you to stop at all the farm stalls and enjoy the hospitality of the B&Bs and guest farms you stay at along the way.

Riding slowly also gives you the chance of a detour or two. If you're on a mountain bike, for example, there are loads of opportunities to dabble in some trail riding. The Elgin trails at the start are world famous; De Hoop Nature Reserve is wild and spectacular; and the relatively new trail network in the Langeberg mountains behind Swellendam will test your skills.

The best place to start – and the HQ for all your planning questions – is Trail's End Bike Hotel in Elgin (*trailsend.bike*). It's owned by Pieter Silberbauer, who recently spearheaded numerous trail upgrades in the Elgin/Grabouw area to help bike tourists on their way.

▲▶ THE ELGIN AREA RECEIVED NUMEROUS TRAIL UPGRADES AFTER THE FLOODS OF 2023. A RAILWAY BRIDGE FROM 1901 WAS ALSO RESTORED, THANKS TO PIETER SILBERBAUER AND HIS TEAM FROM TRAIL'S END BIKE HOTEL.



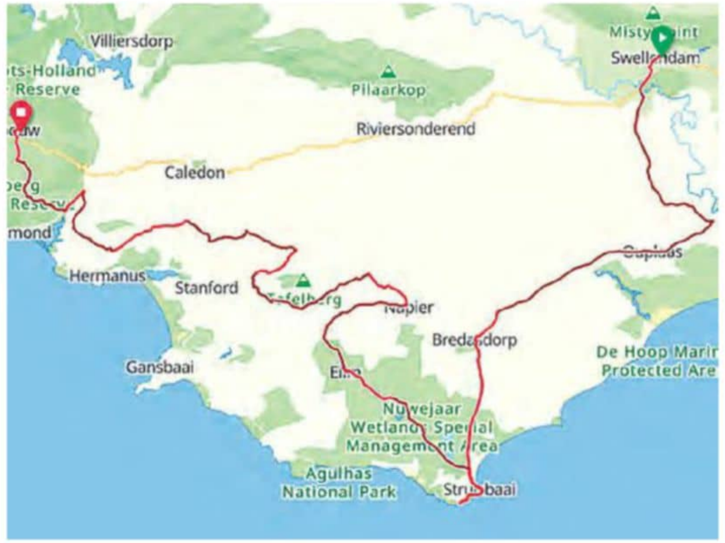
He was also instrumental in restoring an old railway bridge outside Grabouw, dating from 1901, along which steam trains used to puff all the way to Caledon. When a sturdier bridge was built in 1928 and the railway was rerouted, the old bridge fell into disprepair. It stayed that way for nearly a century, until late 2024, when it finally reopened for cyclists after various delays because of fires and floods.

Now renamed the Overberg Meander Crossing, the historic bridge provides riders with a safer and more scenic alternative to the busy roads that previously defined the start of the route. (And it makes life easier for the hundreds of farm workers in the town who commute.)

Silberbauer is one of South Africa's OG mountain bikers and he's excited to show riders his special part of the world. "The Meander has been designed to be joyful and immersive," he says. "Take the time to engage with Mother Nature, and enjoy all the little pleasures along the way." **B**

▲ ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE OVERBERG MEANDER IS THE SECTION ALONG THE BANKS OF THE BREEDE RIVER FROM MALGAS TO SWELLENDAM. THE DIRT ROADS ARE SMOOTH AND QUIET, AND THE LANGEBERG LOOMS EVER LARGER ON THE HORIZON.

Images: Calvin Fisher



THE DETAILS

BEST TIME TO RIDE?

Autumn and spring in the Cape make for dream days in the saddle. The weather is normally mild – not too hot, not too cold, as Goldilocks would say if she were a cyclist. Summer can be hot and windy, but at least you won't have to worry about rain. And in winter, if it *isn't* raining and you luck out with a clear week, it's probably the most spectacular time of all: the canola fields are in full bloom, the aloes are flowering and everything is green.

WHAT ARE THE ROADS LIKE?

The route mostly follows district gravel roads, which are generally in good condition – and quiet, with the exception of the odd farm bakkie. There are some sections along busier tar roads, however, especially the R319 between Agulhas and Bredasdorp. It's worth packing bright lights (front and rear) to make yourself more visible on the road. The extra safety afforded by a follow car is also not a bad idea. Generally, though, you'll be on some of the best touring roads in the country.

THE ROUTE?

As mentioned, the route goes from Elgin/Grabouw to Swellendam, via the Hemel en Aarde Valley, Stanford, Napier, Elim, Agulhas, Bredasdorp and Malgas. You can do it in reverse, or only ride certain sections, or spend more time in areas with other riding in the vicinity, such as Elgin, De Hoop and Swellendam.

WHERE TO STAY?

Almost all the towns along the way have excellent guesthouses and guest farms where you can relax and have a delicious meal. There are campsites, too, if you're on a budget. Once you've worked out your route and how far you'll be riding each day, nailing down accommodation is easy. Here are some handy websites:

- Elgin, Grabouw, Caledon: ***twk.gov.za***
- Kleinmond, Hermanus, Stanford, Gansbaai: ***whalecoast.info***
- Bredasdorp, Struisbaai, Agulhas, Arniston: ***discovercapeagulhas.co.za***
- Swellendam and surrounds: ***swellendam.com***

BIKE CHOICE?

The terrain lends itself to a fast-rolling gravel machine, but a mountain bike will also do the trick. You'll be more comfortable on the corrugated bits, that's for sure. It's also a great route for e-bikes, but only if you keep the daily distances modest. You don't want a flat battery between Papiesvlei and nowhere...

GADGET OF THE MONTH

BOSCH EASYPUMP

R1 279 / TAKEALOT.COM

■ Are you someone who obsesses about inflating your tyres to just the right pressure? Or maybe you've done your time sweating over a floor pump, and now you just want a little luxury in your life?

This neat, battery-powered inflator is the answer. Simply turn it on, set the pressure you want, attach the hose to your tyre valve, and press 'Start'. The device will whirr for a while, and shut off when it reaches the desired pressure.

It works well for mountain-bike tyres and can pump road tyres up to 120psi, or 8 bar. But it's not just for bikes – you can also use the supplied adaptors to inflate a car tyre, air mattress, your son's soccer ball… And it's really handy for travelling, when you might not have space in your car boot or check-in bag for a full-sized floor pump.

A full battery charge should last for about seven tyre inflations, and recharging via USB-C takes just over two hours.

It weighs 420g and it's not tiny, so it's probably not the best pump to take along on a ride unless you're bikepacking; but for your home workshop, or to keep in the car, it's a winner. – *Jon Minster*

BOSCH
EasyPump
0.00
BAR
UNIT
START
STOP

Image Supplied

THERE'S ONLY
ONE
THE ULTIMATE RACE BIKE

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BONTRAGER
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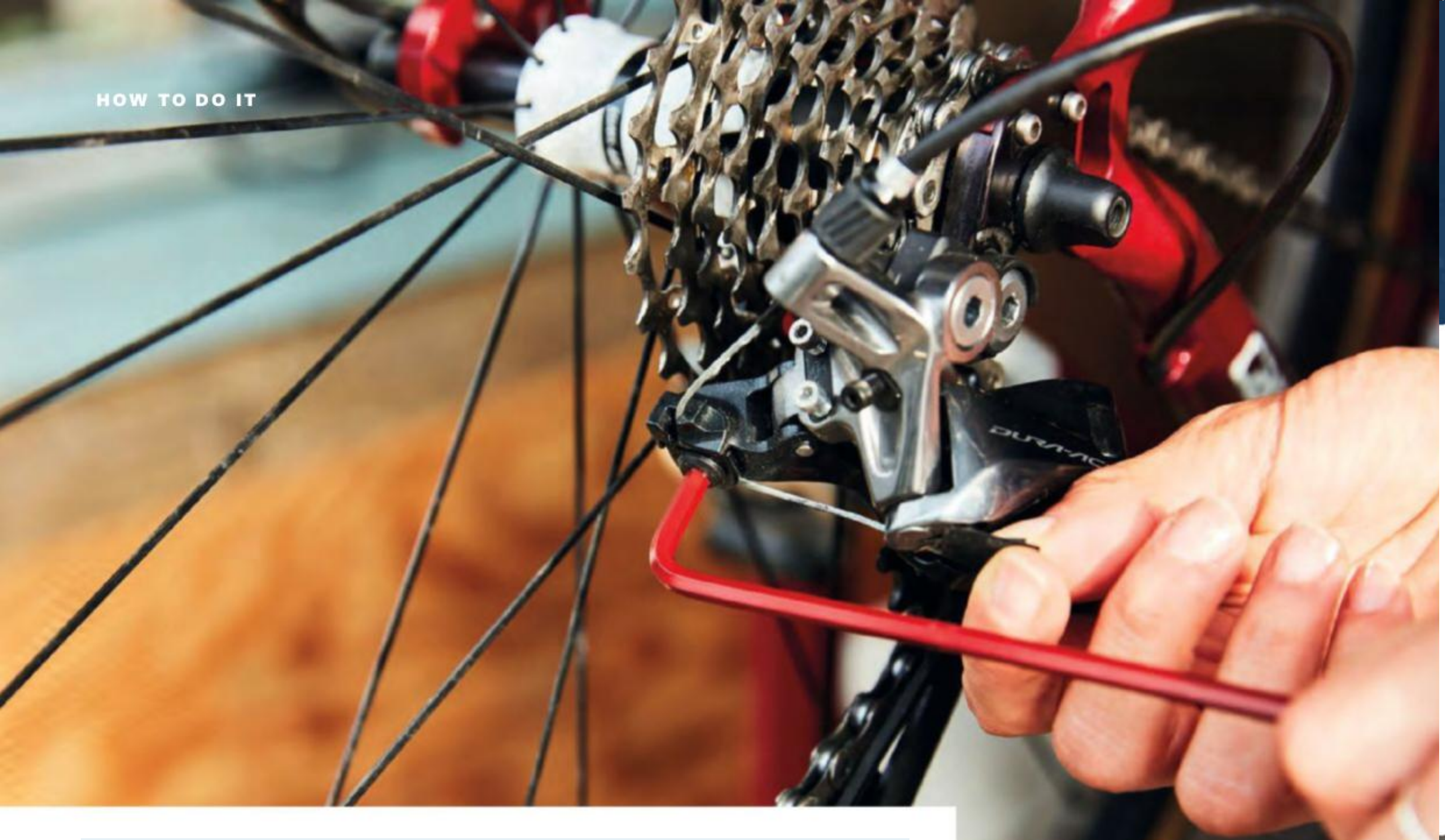


WHAT'S THAT NOISE?

HOW TO DIAGNOSE AND FIX COMMON CREAKS AND SQUEAKS.

■ It's always a good idea to take your bike for a basic service before you line up at the start of a big event like the Cape Town Cycle Tour. But if you don't have the time, or if you prefer to be your own mechanic, here's how to work out what might be causing those irritating noises – and how to fix them.

NOISE: SQUEAKING

Potential culprits: Chain, pedals

If your bike squeaks when you pedal but stops when you freewheel, a dry chain is the probable culprit. Clean and lube it first. If the noise persists, check your drivetrain, or consider replacing the chain.

If the squeak happens with every pedal stroke, your pedals may need attention. Remove them, grease the threads, and reinstall. Spraying lubricant on the pedal springs or clamps can also help.

Still squeaking? Check your cleats – loose bolts or worn-out cleats can be noisy. Tighten them, and apply a wax-based lubricant to keep things quiet.

◄ A CHAIN-CHECKING TOOL CAN HELP YOU DECIDE IF YOUR CHAIN NEEDS TO BE REPLACED (ABOVE). GREASE PEDAL THREADS (LEFT) FOR SQUEAK-FREE RIDING.

NOISE: CREAKING, CLICKING

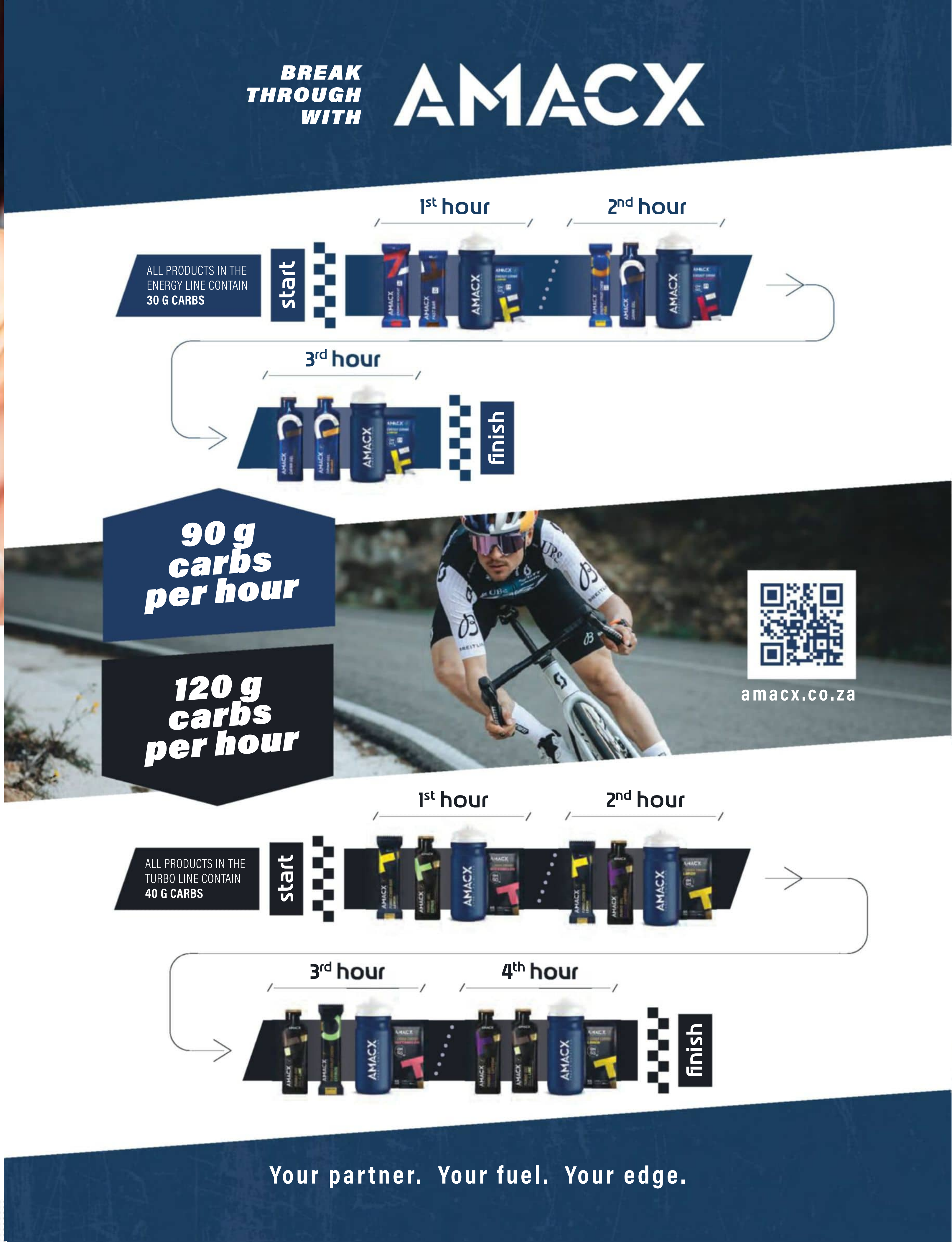
Potential culprits: Seat post, derailleur, bottom bracket

Creaks and clicks are trickier to diagnose. First, check your seat post clamp – too loose or too tight can cause noise. Then, inspect your crank bolts; a loose crank arm can create clicking sounds.

To test your bottom bracket (BB), grab your brakes, press a pedal inward, and listen. A loose or worn-out BB can creak under pressure. Some systems (like SRAM Dub) have a preload ring that might need tightening. Follow the manufacturer's instructions or book a service.

If clicking happens in certain gears, your shift cable might be stretched, or your derailleur hanger could be bent. Adjust the cable using the barrel adjuster, or reset the limits. If that sounds too complex – or if you need the hanger to be straightened or replaced – take it to your LBS workshop.

Images: Amy Wolff; Trevor Raab



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ALL PRODUCTS IN THE ENERGY LINE CONTAIN 30 G CARBS
start
3rd hour
finish
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120 g carbs per hour
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2nd hour
ALL PRODUCTS IN THE TURBO LINE CONTAIN 40 G CARBS
start
3rd hour
4th hour
finish
Your partner. Your fuel. Your edge.

► IF YOUR DISC BRAKES SQUEAL AND SCREECH, THE PADS AND/OR ROTORS MIGHT BE CONTAMINATED. BEFORE YOU REPLACE THEM, TRY WIPING BOTH WITH A CLEAN RAG AND ISOPROPYL ALCOHOL.

NOISE: SCREECHING, CHATTERING

Potential culprit: Disc brakes

If your disc brakes squeal when you brake, contamination is likely. Oil residue, rainwater and aerosol lubricants can all cause this. Clean the rotors and pads with isopropyl alcohol. If they're discoloured or grooved, they may need replacement.

A rhythmic *tsh, tsh, tsh* sound means your calliper might be misaligned. Loosen the bolts, squeeze the brake lever to centre it, then retighten without letting go. That usually does the trick.

NOISE: RATTLING, CLANKING

Potential culprits: Tool bag, headset, cables

A noisy tool bag is an easy fix – wrap tools in a cloth, or switch to a snug-fitting bag.

A loose headset, however, is a bigger issue. Not only is it noisy; it can also affect handling, and damage your frame or fork. To tighten a threadless headset, loosen the stem bolts, tighten the top cap until snug (but not too tight), then retighten the stem bolts to spec with a torque wrench.

◄ IT'S MORE OF A MISSION TO SECURE INTERNALLY ROUTED CABLES (LEFT, ABOVE) THAN EXTERNALLY ROUTED ONES (LEFT, BELOW).

If your bike has internal cable routing, rattling over bumps is common. Some fixes are simple, like adding a zip tie. Others may require disassembling cables or applying sound-damping foam. Externally routed cables are easier – secure them with cable ties or clips.

NOISE: MYSTERIOUS

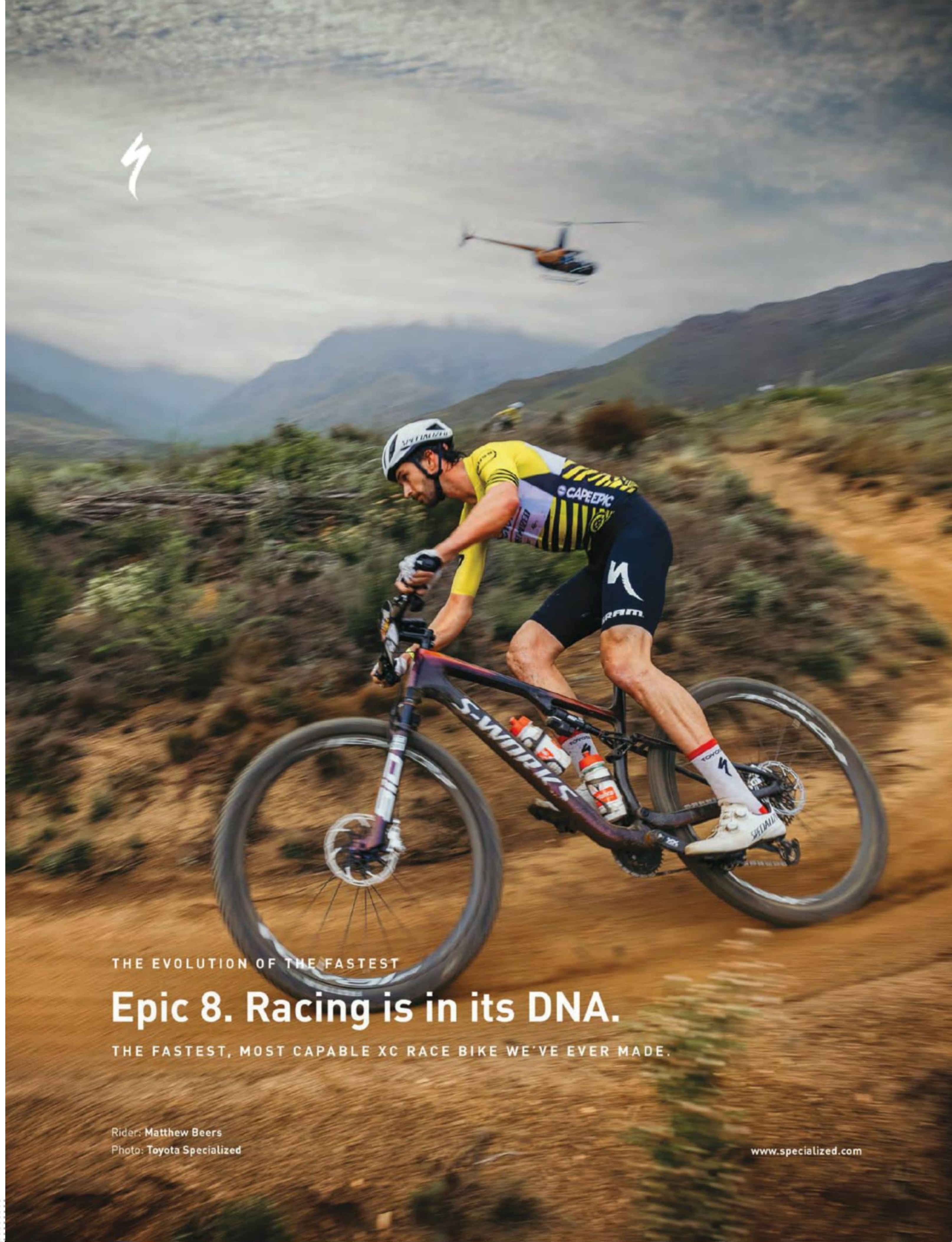
Potential culprit: Frame

While rare, a cracked or defective frame can cause persistent, hard-to-diagnose noises. If you've ruled out everything else, get a professional inspection.

STILL NOT SURE?

Sometimes, a good bike wash and chain lube solves everything. If the noise remains or you're unsure how to fix it, a trip to your local bike shop is always a smart move. – ***Tara Seplavy***

Images: Trevor Raab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Epic 8. Racing is in its DNA.
THE FASTEST, MOST CAPABLE XC RACE BIKE WE'VE EVER MADE.
Rider: Matthew Beers
Photo: Toyota Specialized
www.specialized.com

DON'T MAKE THIS CHAIN LUBE MISTAKE

IT'S ALL ABOUT TIMING.

ARE YOU ONE OF THOSE CYCLISTS whose pre-ride routine involves giving your chain a quick lick of lube? Well, you're not doing your chain any favours!

Applying lube right before a ride is basically the worst way to lube your chain. There's no time for the product to penetrate inside the rollers; rather, it sits on the surface and attracts dirt and grime.

Instead, the best practice is to lube your chain right *after* a ride, or at least the day before your ride. If you clean and re-lube immediately after a ride – especially after wet or muddy conditions – you prevent grime from hardening, making future cleaning easier. If post-ride maintenance isn't possible, applying lube the night before a ride still allows enough time for proper absorption.

HOW TO APPLY CHAIN LUBE PROPERLY

Excess lube on the outside of the chain is wasted – it only attracts more dirt, causing faster wear. Wiping the chain immediately after applying lube also wastes product, since it hasn't had time to penetrate the chain's links.

Instead, follow these steps:

- Clean your chain by wiping away dirt and grime.
- Apply lube according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- Let it sit for the recommended setting time (some lubes require up to 24 hours for optimal performance).

CHOOSE THE RIGHT LUBE

Different lubes work best in different conditions, but they all need time on the chain before you ride.

- Wet lube (there are options from Weldtite, Motul and Muc-Off) stays in liquid form and doesn't dry out after application. As the name suggests, it's great for riding in grimy conditions; but it must be applied with enough time to set.
- Dry lubes come in two forms – wax-based (like Squirt and Smoov) and Teflon-based (like Finish Line Dry). Wax-based dry lubes are generally longer-lasting than Teflon-based; but no matter which you choose, both also require substantial drying time.

– Dan Chabanov **B**

WORD'AGE

BONK

No, it has nothing to do with that other activity...

Bonking in cycling is when you experience a sudden and severe depletion of energy that makes you feel weak and dizzy and unable to continue at a normal pace. It happens because you've run out of glycogen stores; and the best way to avoid the dreaded bonk is to eat while you ride.

The term originated in British endurance sports in the mid-20th century. It's believed to come from the idea of the body 'hitting a wall' or 'banging' into an invisible barrier – a pretty apt description for what bonking feels like!

Images: Trevor Raab (lube); Canva

FALKE
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SET THE PACE

Image: Karin Schermbrucker / CTCT

CYCLING'S SUPER SUNDAY

THE CAPE TOWN CYCLE TOUR IS ICONIC – AS A BIKE RACE, AND AS AN EVENT THAT BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER FROM ACROSS SOUTH AFRICA.

BY **DAVID MOSELEY**

LIKE THE COMPONENTS THAT COMBINE to create the perfect bicycle, the Cycle Tour is made up of many moving parts.

You might think it's just something you arrive at on Sunday morning and leave later in the day after (hopefully) enjoying your ride, but that's not even half the story. From refreshment station crew to elite athletes to the physios at the massage tables, everyone involved has a unique perspective on the event.

Yet on one thing they all agree: it's a day like no other. A coming together of everything that makes cycling, Cape Town and the events community of South Africa some of the best in the world.

Ahead of this year's ride, we spent some time with a few of the people who make the CTCT an annual must-do spectacle.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER TOBIAS GINSBERG

■ If you've marvelled at some of the imagery from just about any of the big cycling events in South Africa, chances are you've seen Tobias Ginsberg's work. As one of this country's most prolific lensmen, he's honed a lifetime of photography experience to produce some of the most iconic shots from the Cape Town Cycle Tour and many other events.

Ginsberg got his first taste of the photography business when he was eight years old, when his father Ivor started the Portrait Place (which later became Action Photo) – taking thousands of photos during events, which riders and runners could buy as a memento of their day.

"I started off as a loader," Ginsberg says. "Back then we used film; there were no digital cameras. We'd ship big boxes of Fuji film with us for events, and I'd help load the film into the camera while the photographer snapped away – 36 times per roll, and then change. The photographer and the loader would stand in the middle of the road and just take pics of all the participants at key points along the route."

As Ginsberg got older, his father allowed him to upgrade from loader to photographer, to earn extra money. As a result, he got to travel the world, working for the business at events like the London Marathon and the UCI Golden Bike series.

GINSBERG OFTEN HAS TO HANG OFF THE BACK OF A SPEEDING MOTORBIKE TO GET THE RIGHT ANGLES OVER ROLLING HILLS AND DEATH-DEFYING DESCENTS…

But snapping thousands of pictures of race participants wasn't enough of a creative challenge for Ginsberg; and finally he began to branch out on his own into more creative event photography.

"I'd seen such beautiful imagery from around the world, and I knew that I wanted to take pictures like that," he remembers. "But it wasn't like I planned to be a photographer. It just kinda happened, and then progressed."

Being an event photographer is not for the faint of heart. Ginsberg often has to hang off the back of a speeding motorbike to get the right angles over rolling hills and death-defying descents.

"I admit I'm addicted to the adrenalin of photographing a bike race, especially when you're following the elites," he says. "Those guys are phenomenal athletes – it's amazing to be that close to them. You need to trust your bike rider in those situations; for several years now I've been working with just one guy on major events."

Ginsberg spends a lot of time preparing for event day; researching new routes, looking for the best angles, and planning where he's going to get his best shots when the pressure's on.

"In a bike race, you need to know where your light is going to be, figure out where you need to be in the race – in the break or the main group – and still be able to tell the story of the race through the images," he says. "When you get it right and see those images, you just feel complete. It's an amazing feeling."

THAT ULTIMATE CHAPPIES SHOT

Ginsberg will generally take two camera bodies with him on a race: one fitted with a wide-angle 14-24mm lens, and the other with a 70-200mm telephoto. That way he can switch between cameras when the moment arises without having to change lenses – almost impossible when you're barrelling down a road at 60km/h.

Keeping everything dry and safe when it's raining or blowing (the Cape Town Cycle Tour is notorious for wind) is one of the toughest challenges, along with the pressure to produce the fresh images that either a media house or a client demands.

"It's never boring, because the challenge always changes. Some days you have mist, other days it's raining. I remember when the Cycle Tour went through areas where the fires had burned a few years ago, and how black and desolate everything was. You must constantly adapt to those changes."

Despite having worked as an events photographer for so many years, Ginsberg is determined to continue honing his craft. "It's very competitive out there, so you need to keep pushing the limits and getting better photos."

He's still looking for that ultimate Chapman's Peak shot, which he says he still hasn't quite managed. "I've tried with 800mm and 400mm lenses and I've tried all sorts of angles, but I'm not satisfied yet," he says.

As for future events, Ginsberg is working hard to get to the World Championships in Rwanda this year, and on landing a gig to cover the Tour de France. Always eager to learn, he's inspired by photographers like Russell Ellis (@cyclingimages) and Sean Hardy (@hardyccphotos). "These guys inspire me regularly," he says. "They're taking cycling photography to another level.

"It's about creating art." – *Mike Finch*

Follow Tobias on Instagram: @tobisa

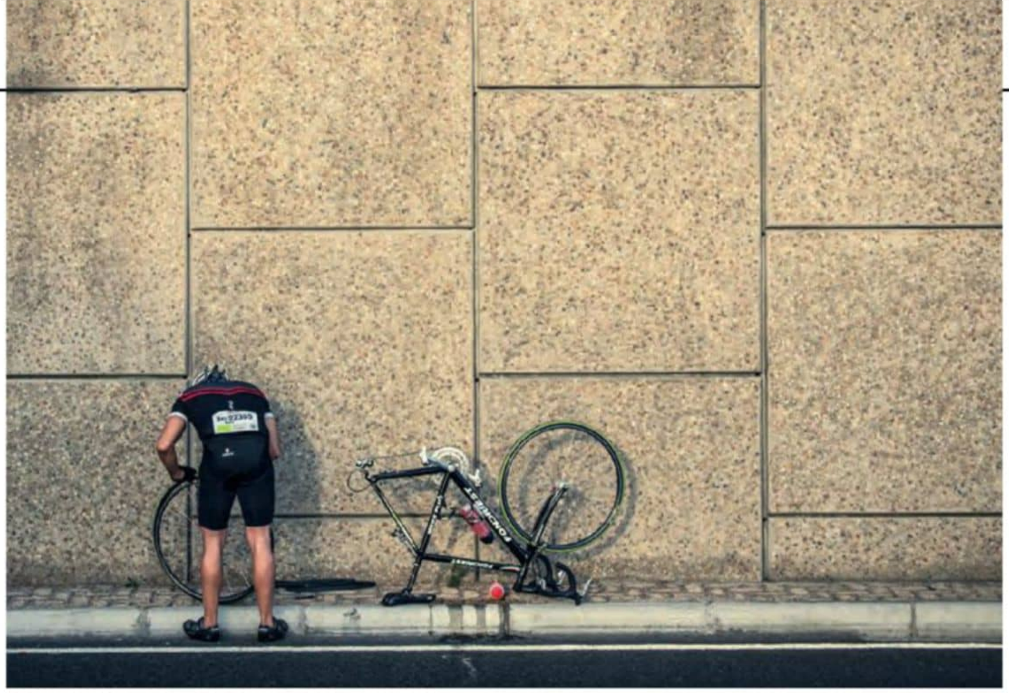
REMEMBER 2015, THE YEAR OF THE TERRIBLE FIRE IN CAPE TOWN, WHEN THE CYCLE TOUR ROUTE WAS SHORTENED TO MUIZENBERG AND BACK? IT WAS UNOFFICIALLY DUBBED THE 'SOLIDARITY RIDE' TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE EFFORTS OF FIREFIGHTERS AND AFFECTED COMMUNITIES. IT WAS ALSO (UNLUCKILY) THE YEAR THAT MARK CAVENDISH DECIDED TO COME TO SOUTH AFRICA… HE AND HIS ETIXX-QUICK-STEP TEAMMATE, MARK RENSHAW, WERE PIPPED TO THE LINE BY LOCAL LEGEND NOLAN HOFFMAN IN THE SPRINT.

MOSTERT'S MILL IN MOWBRAY IS A LANDMARK EARLY ON IN THE RACE. IT'S THE OLDEST WORKING WINDMILL IN SOUTH AFRICA, BUILT IN 1796, AND IT'S THE ONLY SURVIVING DUTCH-STYLE WINDMILL IN THE COUNTRY. IT WAS DESTROYED BY FIRE IN 2021 BUT HAS SINCE BEEN RESTORED.

Images: Tobias Ginsberg

THE CAPE TOWN CYCLE TOUR ATTRACTS ALL SORTS OF WEIRD AND WONDERFUL RIDERS AND SPECTATORS, WHETHER IT'S TWO RASTAS ON A TANDEM (ABOVE) OR JANE FONDA AND A COUCH (BELOW), WHERE WEARY CYCLISTS CAN TAKE A BREAK. GIVE IN TO THE VIBE, AND ENJOY YOUR LAP AROUND THE PENINSULA!

Images: Tobias Ginsberg



WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE. YOU'RE RIDING ALONG, ALL SMILES, WHEN YOU HEAR THE DREADED *HISSS*... THIS POOR GUY DIDN'T GET MUCH FURTHER THAN THE START BEFORE HE HAD TO FLIP HIS BIKE AND CHANGE THE TUBE.

ROAD ART ALONG THE WAY, ARTFULLY CAPTURED WITH A BLURRED RIDER IN THE BACKGROUND. TOUR DE FRANCE-LEVEL STUFF HERE, TOBI!

CHAPMAN'S PEAK BETWEEN NOORDHOEK AND HOUT BAY IS ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND CHALLENGING SECTIONS OF THE CAPE TOWN CYCLE TOUR. BUT IT HASN'T ALWAYS FEATURED ON THE ROUTE: FROM 2000 TO 2003, CHAPPIES WAS CLOSED DUE TO ROCKFALLS AND ROADWORKS, SO THE RACE WAS REROUTED OVER OU KAAPSE WEG – MUCH TO THE HORROR OF MANY RIDERS!

19843342

THE PHYSIO
ZEENATH HIGGINS

Higgins is in charge of easing your post-race aches and pains. She coordinates the physiotherapy team at the finish precinct, and ensures that many (physio) hands make light work of the cramps and strains that might affect riders out on the route.

"In total, there are more than 300 physios involved at Cycle Tour – made up of students and qualified physios," says Higgins, who has been working with Cycle Tour since she was a student herself. "My main role these days is to arrange everything on the day, and to liaise with the team from Mediclinic, the drivers of the sweep vehicles, the race office at the Venue of Control (VOC), and so on."

There are nine physio stations on the Cycle Tour route, starting at Simon's Town. [*You're not meant to cramp before then. – Ed.*] Although everything is finalised and set up before the Cycle Tour starts, Higgins still likes to do a 'drive-through' early on Sunday morning, to make sure every station is in place.

Then the fun starts.

"The main issue we deal with is cramping – and that's mostly from inexperienced cyclists. On really hot days we'll have more cramping; on really cold days our main issue is hypothermia. We work very closely with the medical staff for any major issues that arise.

"Of course, there are also those cyclists who think we're there to give massages 'for fun' on the route, or sports massages at the finish. We just politely tell them that's what their private physiotherapist is for!"

The build-up to Cycle Tour is a stressful time, but once the last rider is over the line and the physiotherapy station at the finish is closed, Higgins can reflect on all the hard work. "I get so stressed out in the lead-up to Cycle Tour; then by 5pm on race day, everyone is shattered… But once it's all over, it feels really special to have been part of such a great event. It's a brilliant day, and it's incredibly rewarding to play a part in it."

"OF COURSE, THERE ARE ALSO THOSE CYCLISTS WHO THINK WE'RE THERE TO GIVE MASSAGES 'FOR FUN' ON THE ROUTE, OR SPORTS MASSAGES AT THE FINISH."

PHYSIOS
POWERADE

HAVE YOU EVER CRAMPED ON THE CYCLE TOUR? THEN YOU'LL KNOW THAT THE PHYSIOS ON THE ROUTE CAN BE A LIFESAVER!

Images: CTCT / Supplied

PHYSIO
PHYSIO
autoZONE
EMCON

Images: Change a Life; Getty Images

START
Rotary
PEDAL POWER ASSOCIATION
CITY OF CAPE TOWN ISIXEKO SASEKAPA STAD KAAPSTAD
Standard Bank
LIBERTY
POWERADE
CYCLE TOUR
CREW

EEEVERYBODY SAY HOOPLA! THE FAST BUNCHES GATHER BEFORE SUNRISE FOR THE START OF ANOTHER LEGENDARY CYCLE TOUR.

THE VOC BOSS
JANINE JACOBS

■ Janine Jacobs is the Cycle Tour's Race Director. She started working in the Cycle Tour call centre, in 2008, before moving into the operations division a decade later in 2018. Now she has her finger on the pulse of the entire event. On race day, she helps run the show from the Venue of Control, or VOC.

"I essentially deal with all the 'fires' that can happen during the race – even the literal ones!" she says. "Ultimately, I'm the person who gets all the information from the various role players, and then gives the event the green light to begin. I deal with all the officials, from the City to the marshals. But it's the colonel – the authorised member allocated from SAPS – who's actually in charge. The colonel asks if the race can start, and he has the power to shut it down if anything extreme is happening along the route, like protests, weather or fire."

Jacobs says it's her role to act as the glue between all the key event decision-makers on the day. While riders are making their way to the city centre, or nervously waiting in the start pen, multiple moving parts behind the scenes are slipping into place. The likes of SAPS, the event medical team, the Western Cape Government health services, disaster management, traffic, the fire department, Search and Rescue South Africa (SARZA), SANParks and more all feed information to Jacobs.

It's Jacobs' job to make sense of it all.

"At the VOC, there's a tactical room and a decision-making room – about a hundred people, all-in," she says. "A lot is happening behind the scenes. It can be very stressful between 9am and noon, when the faster riders are out on the route; and then again after 2pm, when the slower, maybe less fit riders are out there. These are the times when the medical dispatch team is the busiest."

Naturally, monitoring every single aspect of an event that features nearly 30 000 participants is a stressful task. Jacobs takes it all in her stride; although she does admit to enjoying a relaxing Sunday night alone, before returning home to her four kids!

"It's a day full of nerves, definitely," she says. "But I love it. On the day, I look forward to two things: first is seeing the looks on the faces of the elites when they finish. If they're smiling and happy, then I know conditions have been good. The second is going to the finish and just watching people complete the ride.

"I love the emotion, the smiles, the cheers. I love seeing everyone looking so happy."

Images: CTCT / Supplied

Realty Dynamix
RD
Raleigh

THE TANDEM RACER
DAVID GARRETT

■ Garrett won the men's tandem race at last year's Cape Town Cycle Tour, racing with partner Paul-Dean Rörich. "I've done a lot of solo racing at the Cycle Tour over the years, but there's just something I enjoy about racing a tandem," Garrett says. "I've raced tandem often, even winning the mixed category with my wife – a true test of a marriage is to race tandem at the Cycle Tour with your wife! We're still married, so clearly it was a good experience...

"Paul-Dean and I are actually a bad example for tandem cyclists, because we only climbed on the bike once before last year's race. I can tell you, I was a lot stiffer on the Monday after the race than if I'd been riding a traditional bike. This year we'll definitely do a bit more training on the bike, and a few lead-up events."

Garrett says the downside to tandem riding is the extra weight – but the upside is the extra thrill. "The danger with tandem racing comes from a bunch catching you; then the bunch can get too big. When that happens, it can be very hard to navigate. We were in a huge bunch one year where there was a massive crash – you just can't avoid anything.

"The speed can get nerve-wracking, but that's also part of the fun. One year we caught the Veteran Men on the Blue Route and just sat behind them. Then, just past Boulders, we attacked and raced away. They couldn't catch us!"

The trick to tandem racing, Garrett says, is to have the right partner, and to ride hard enough so that no one can catch you. "I'm usually the pilot and sit in front. I've been on the back three times, but there's an art to that, like being able to lean into the corners. Getting the right pair of riders on the bike is crucial to the enjoyment. You must be the same fitness level, you must be in sync – the balance is crucial, because you can feel when the other rider isn't pulling their weight."

THE MOTO MARSHAL

DON DANIELS

Daniels heads up the BMW MCC Moto Marshals. These are the motorbikes that under normal circumstances, you might not even notice on Cycle Tour Sunday. But if you need help, they appear miraculously at your side. "Our main role at the Cycle Tour is to act as the eyes and ears of the organisation," says Daniels. "We're out on the road and we're very mobile, because we're on motorbikes; so if anything happens that needs to be relayed to the VOC, we can do that quite quickly."

The Moto Marshals also act as roving mechanics on the day, something that has seen many a stricken cyclist smile with relief. "There are about 35 of us on bikes during the day, so we watch out for anyone who might need bicycle assistance. We carry loads of spares, and assist where we can with tyres, spare tubes, batteries for electronic shifters – anything you can think of, really. Cyclists sitting on the side of the road are always very happy to see us!"

Daniels and his team are present on the route throughout the day. Some Moto Marshals start at the front with the elite riders, carrying the race commissar, while the last marshal leaves with the last group of the day and forms part of the sweep team.

Essentially, the Moto Marshals are the Cape Town Cycle Tour's all-rounders. "We carry medical personnel on the bikes. If there's a crash, we can carry out basic first aid before the ambulance gets there. In that instance, we also take control of the scene and ensure riders can get around the crash site safely. We can even assist with basic resource management – like, if a water point runs out of toilet paper, we'll go and fetch some!"

All Moto Marshals on race day are volunteers, with the club's involvement at Cycle Tour stretching back 13 years. "It's just a special day for us. We love the *gees* factor of helping people, and seeing their relief when they've been in a pickle – it's so rewarding. Riders are blown away when we stop to help them; often they don't even know the service exists.

"And of course, making a difference in a medical emergency is very satisfying."

THE FASTEST MAN

KENT MAIN

Main is a professional cyclist, and the winner of the 2024 Cape Town Cycle Tour men's race.

"As a pro, winning the Cycle Tour is something that can carry you for a long time. It's probably bigger than winning the national championships!

"I can tell someone I won nationals, and they'll have a vague understanding. But if I say I won the Cycle Tour, it all makes sense to them – it gets so much hype, and has such a great history, that even people with just a passing interest in cycling know what you're talking about."

Main first participated in the Cycle Tour at

"AS A PRO, IT'S NICE THAT WE FINISH EARLY, AND GET TO CHEER ON THE OTHER RIDERS. LAST YEAR I WAS STILL 'CELEBRATING' WHEN THE LAST RIDER FINISHED..."

Images: CTCT / Supplied

KENT MAIN CROSSES THE FINISH LINE IN 2024 – WINNING FROM THE BREAKAWAY, WHICH IS UNUSUAL AT THE CYCLE TOUR.

the age of 12. "I *think* that's how old I was…" he says. "It was one of the windy ones – I won't forget that.

"But that's my point about the Cycle Tour having so much hype. We'd come down from Joburg to ride in this amazing event, on this incredible route. It's always been a highlight. Naturally, as a professional, the Cycle Tour has also always been an event I wanted to win, so winning last year was the cherry on top."

Main says the enduring appeal of the Cycle Tour is that anybody with a bike can ride it, on roads that are fully closed. "The full road closure is a huge selling point," he says. "And you can ride the Cycle Tour no matter what type of bike you have lying around – a road bike, a mountain bike, a tandem, a unicycle… even an e-bike. As a cycling event, it's incredibly accessible."

Another part of the Cycle Tour's appeal is the way it brings people together. "I was chatting to friends recently, and we put the event down as something like the Comrades, or when the Springboks are playing a test match – everyone just seems happy and in a better mood when it's on. It's a great day, where only the Cycle Tour matters and nothing can ruin the enjoyment.

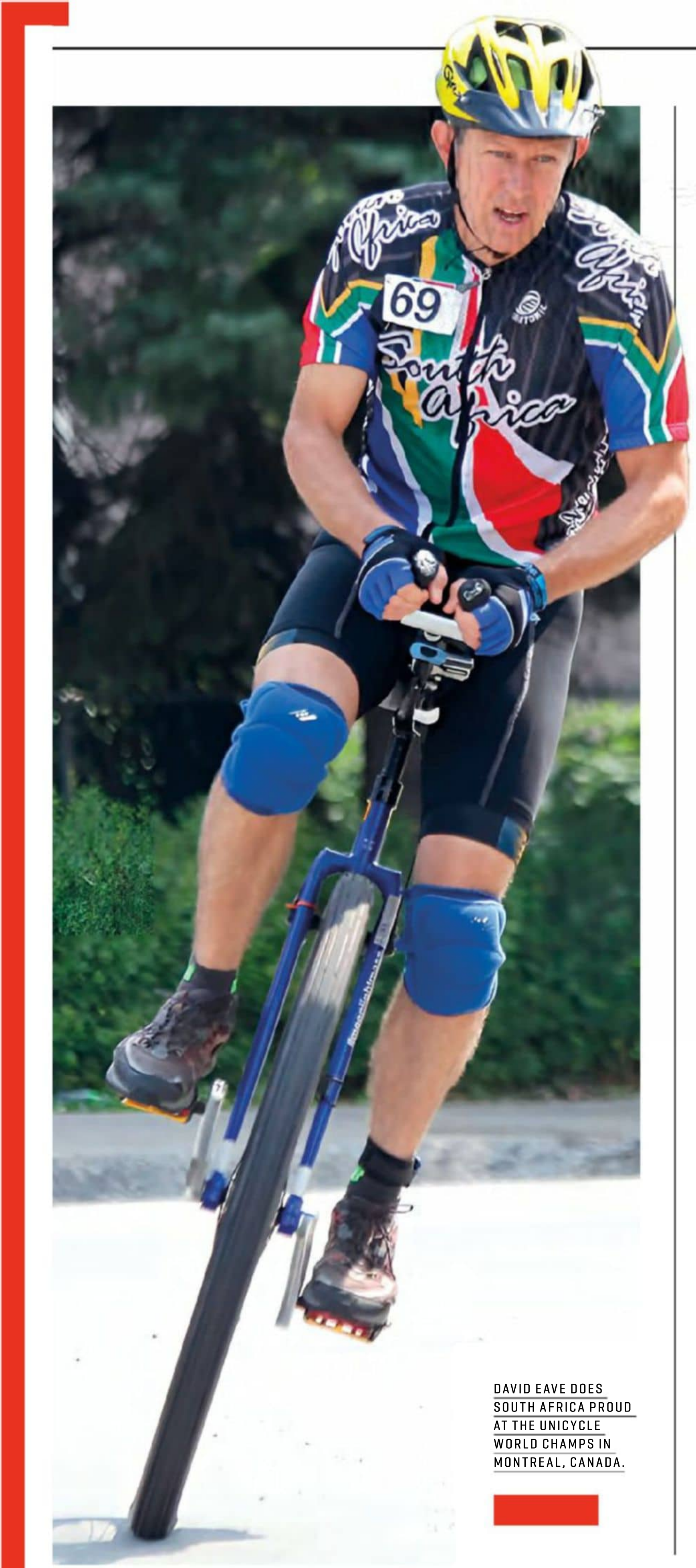
"As a pro, it's nice that we finish early, and get to cheer on the other riders. Last year I was still 'celebrating' when the last rider finished…"

For Main, events like the Cycle Tour are essential when it comes to growing South Africa's professional ranks of cyclists. "You can't just wake up at 16 and decide to join the World Tour. You have to grow. You have to learn and evolve through the levels.

"The Cycle Tour and our other major road events are essential for this. They ensure the longevity of cycling in South Africa."

THE TOP FIVE MEN'S FINISHERS AT THE 2024 CYCLE TOUR, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: LUKE MOIR (5TH), ALAN HATHERLY (3RD), KENT MAIN (1ST), CHARLIE ALDRIDGE (2ND) AND JACO VENTER (4TH).

Images: Change a Life; Getty Images



DAVID EAVE DOES SOUTH AFRICA PROUD AT THE UNICYCLE WORLD CHAMPS IN MONTREAL, CANADA.

DARLING BREW

THE UNICYCLIST
DAVID EAVE

Eave has been participating in the Cape Town Cycle Tour since 1987. In fact, since completing his first, he's only missed one event – due to work commitments. Even more impressively, he's completed the Cycle Tour multiple times on a unicycle.

"I was driving to work one Sunday in 1986 and I saw all these cyclists riding along Edinburgh Drive. I thought, 'I have to try that.' So the following year, I completed my first Cycle Tour – in the pouring rain!"

It wasn't until the late 2000s that Eave was introduced to the unique challenges of riding a unicycle. "Around 2007 or 2008, my son Dylan and his friend bought unicycles. Dylan pestered me to get one and ride the Cycle Tour on it. I kept telling him it was impossible.

"But he kept persisting; and eventually, with the help of my late wife, I started to practise on a unicycle. My wife would hold me up on one side while I held onto a bin to get my balance."

After a month of solid practice, Eave was able to (uni)cycle around the block. Then he progressed to riding to the beachfront and back. By 2011, he was able to complete the Cycle Tour on his unicycle. "I'll tell you this," he says. "It was very painful. Some parts of the body were very numb at the end of that ride!"

Eave's impressive one-wheeled accomplishment took him on a journey around the world. Soon after completing the Cycle Tour he discovered that there's a Unicycle World Champs. He participated in Italy ("So out of my depth"), in Canada ("Much better – I got bronze in my age group for the 10km, and silver in the marathon distance") and in Spain ("It rained. And I had no raincoat. I did badly").

"In hindsight, it's crazy to think that holding onto a bin in my backyard allowed me to visit all those countries!" he says. **B**

By **BILL DONAHUE**
Photography by **TREVOR RAAB**

ONE MAN'S CRUSADE TO TAKE DOWN ZWIFT CHEATS

INDOOR CYCLING AND VIRTUAL RACING ARE BOOMING — AND SO ARE THE RANKS OF DIGITAL DOPERS ABUSING THE PLATFORMS.

IT WAS LIKE AN ITALIAN OPERA. FIRST A BEAUTIFUL TRANSFORMATION, FOLLOWED BY SHEER BLISS – AND THEN THE ABYSS OF DESPAIR.

In 2019, Luciano Pollastri, a human-resources specialist who grew up in France and who now lives in Madrid, weighed 150kg. He was flying 200 days a year for his job, eating obsessively, and working out only sporadically. That year he underwent gastric bypass surgery, then lost 68kg in seven months. Not long after that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, he mounted a bicycle for the first time in decades.

Then he joined Zwift, the world's most popular virtual cycling platform. Its roughly 1 million subscribers sit on stationary bikes and travel through a virtual world called Watopia, climbing pixelated mountains and traversing simulated forests and plains as they compete and train. Soon he was pedalling with an almost maniacal hunger, often logging four or five Zwift sessions a day. "On the weekends," he says, "I was spending almost my entire day there."

Gregarious and effusive, 48-year-old Luciano found a reprieve from the loneliness that hit so many of us during the pandemic. Chatting over a headset, his bike connected to a Wahoo Kickr V6 smart trainer while rolling through the virtual world displayed on his TV screen, he told his new Zwift friends of the fears he felt living near a hospital, hearing ambulance sirens 24/7; and he divulged the worries that gripped him post-surgery. "Obesity is a disease," he says. "Eating is a disease, and I was afraid I would fall back into it amid my anxiety over Covid."

Luciano's online socialising buoyed him out of depression. "I started believing in friendship, in humans, in solidarity again," he says.

Meanwhile, he got good. Endowed with the strength of a Clydesdale, after lugging about his 150kg frame, he became obsessed with bike racing's go-to metric: watts per kilogram, which measures a rider's power output relative to their body weight. In 13 months, Luciano increased the power he could produce for a sustained amount of time from 2.7 to 4.3 watts per kilogram; putting him, roughly speaking, in the top 10 percent of serious Zwifters.

Suddenly, he found himself sucked into a fraught and fractious Zwift subculture.

Zwift is largely a non-competitive online universe where casual riders can get in a workout while swooping down simulated hills and tucking into virtual pacelines in the company of other cyclists worldwide. For many, the foremost pleasure is the realistic-seeming scenery that spools on the screen as the rider wends their way through Watopia: the charming French villages and snowcapped mountains that you can feel in your thighs. (To partake of these immersive delights, cyclists connect their bikes to 'smart' trainers that communicate power and other data to the platform. As riders climb virtual gradients, their connected trainers increase pedalling resistance, so they huff and puff just as they would on the open road.)

But there's another side to Zwift. About 30 percent of users are on the platform to compete. There are dozens of races each day, most of them low-key and lasting 20 to 40 minutes, and the Zwift Racing League involves some 35 000 competitors divided into categories based on their previous power outputs. Cyclists can train with like-minded riders (with DIRT, for example, which stands for 'Dads Indoors Riding Trainers'), and real-life social get-togethers are common.

In 2021, thanks to his impressive numbers, Luciano found himself welcomed onto one of the most dominant squads in the tumultuous but decidedly amateur Zwift Racing League: The Coalition. And as a newcomer to cycling, he was innocently unaware of how thoroughly cheating has plagued bike racing since 1903, when the first Tour de France champion, Maurice Garin, triumphed only because his teammates shoved challengers off their bikes, then jumped up and down on their wheels, smashing them.

One day, as The Coalition was racing in Watopia, Luciano watched in horror as a whole team flew past at speeds that were impossible to comprehend. "All of a sudden, they were going way faster – so fast, I knew something was wrong," he says. They'd cheated, Luciano claims, by lowering their listed weight mid-race, thereby increasing their alleged watts per kilogram and going 'faster'.

Yes, people cheat on Zwift, generally by manipulating data in the privacy of their homes. Almost certainly, they've been doing so since the platform launched in 2014. Kevin Bouchard-Hall, a one-time road-racing pro who now hosts the Zwift-centric podcast Nowhere Fast, agrees: "The platform is rife with cheating," he says. "In the community leagues, where Luciano was racing, it's the Wild West. It's Wonkyville."

How widespread is the cheating? In 2021, college student James Robertson surveyed nearly 600 Zwifters. He wrote, "About 46 percent of participants admitted to 'cheating' at least once; 7 percent admitted to cheating often." Eric Schlange, the founder of Zwift Insider, a community-driven virtual cycling site, feels that those numbers are high. "Maybe 10 percent of riders have some sort of an issue that misrepresents their fitness on the platform," he says. "But the vast majority of those have good intentions, and have just miscalibrated their equipment."

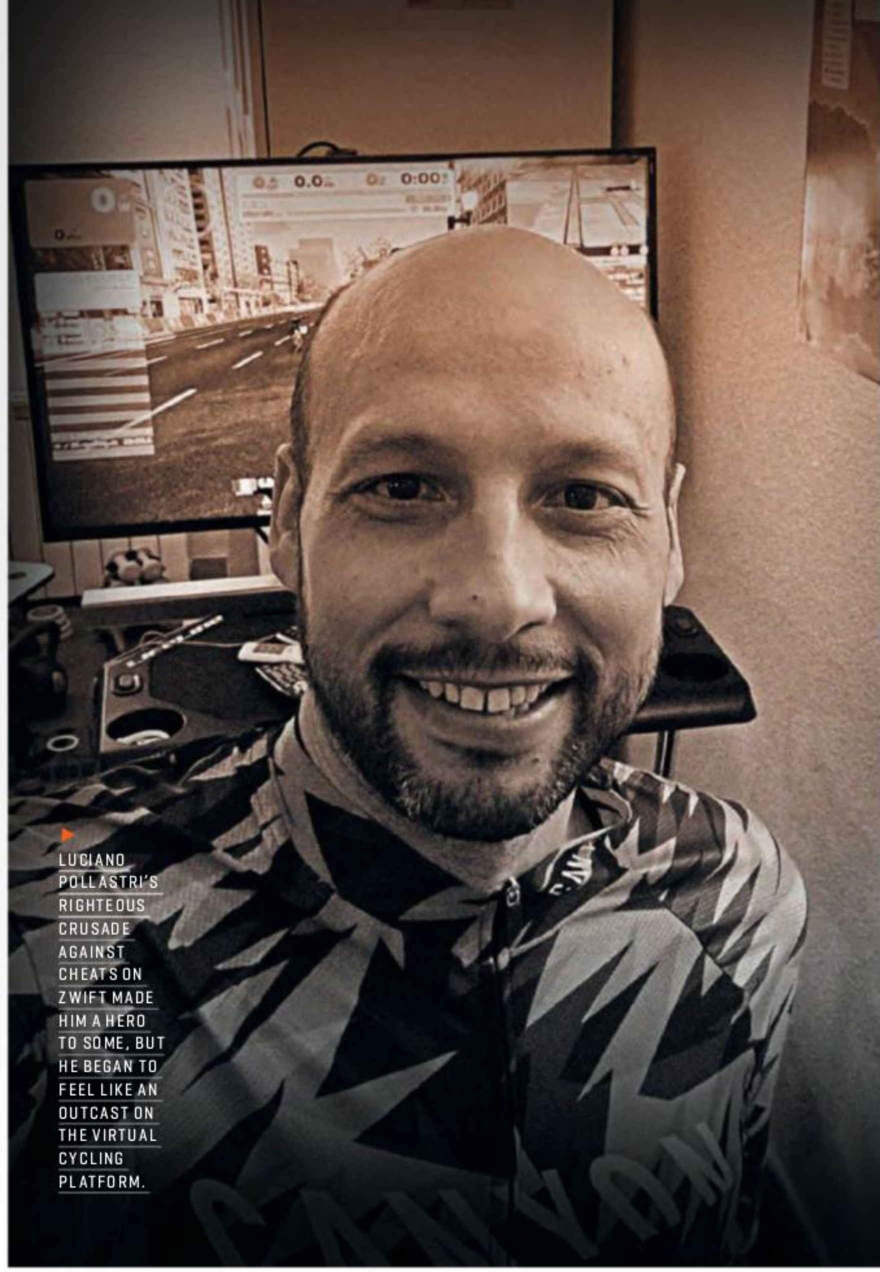
Cheating delivers Zwift a dilemma: should the platform deploy draconian rules and cheat-detection technology to ensure that every race is fair? Or should it consider that stuff like required pre-race weigh-ins can feel like a buzzkill to the average Joe who just wants to have fun while working out?

The question is consequential. Indoor cycling now brings in about US$1.7 billion annually. And the sport is projected to grow rapidly over the next five years to more than $3 billion, according to market research firm Prophecy Market Insights. Cyclists worldwide worry about road safety and face a decline in accessible outdoor green spaces. Buoyed by those factors and others, the esports industry as a whole, which includes virtual cycling, is expected to grow fivefold, to $12 billion, by 2030.

Of the millions of cyclists riding indoors, very few feel passionately about fairness in online bike racing; so in recent years, Zwift's cheat-management strategy has largely favoured Average Joe over the geeked-out racing elite. Zwift has updated its software so that the weight cheat is no longer possible, but the devil's toolbox is deep. A group called the Fair E-Racing Alliance (FERA) recently compiled a list of 75 ways to cheat on the platform.

One of the more well-known ways is the so-called 'heat cheat', which involves taking a hairdryer to a trainer's power meter. The sensor is usually made of metal, and is inclined to give higher wattage readings when it's warmer. Using some basic details found on online forums, *Bicycling* tried the method and saw double-digit increases in the watts calculated by the heated trainer over those displayed on a separate power meter.

Zwift spokesperson Chris Snook said his company is aware of the 75 stratagems FERA identified, but he notes that they are "not specific to Zwift" and could be deployed on other virtual cycling platforms. Snook says that cheaters constitute "an extremely low number of Zwifters" and that a number of the cheats on the FERA list "require extensive technical knowledge to execute".



LUCIANO POLLASTRI'S RIGHTEOUS CRUSADE AGAINST CHEATS ON ZWIFT MADE HIM A HERO TO SOME, BUT HE BEGAN TO FEEL LIKE AN OUTCAST ON THE VIRTUAL CYCLING PLATFORM.

Still, cheating has shaken virtual cycling at the elite level. In January 2024, at the USA Cycling ESports National Championships, as riders toiled away in their homes, one of them, Sarah Roach, was disqualified after she pedalled irregularly in the finals, pushing furiously for a few seconds, then coasting, then repeating the cycle.

The Zwift Accuracy and Data Analysis (ZADA) team, a group of Zwift employees and consultants led by Cambridge-trained astrophysicist George Gilbert, is the platform's most visible backstop against cheating. It scrutinises an athlete's power readings to detect foul play, particularly during elite races. After the National Championships, it looked at Roach's performance and disqualified her for producing so-called 'sticky watts'. When a rider coasts on some trainers, as Roach did, the power stays elevated for several seconds, yielding virtual motion at no caloric cost.

Roach insists that she didn't cheat. In the comments section on YouTube, she acknowledged that "I look weird on camera, and it was perceived as cheating" but she suggested that when she was videotaped, she didn't even know how to produce sticky watts. She added, "I have a clear conscience."

Why, then, was her pedalling syncopated? When asked in an email, Roach declined to answer.

ZWIFT HAS REINED IN SOME METHODS OF CHEATING, BUT USERS CAN STILL MANIPULATE THEIR TRAINER'S DATA WITH HAIRDRYERS AND OTHER TOOLS.

#FREELUCIANO BECAME A VIRTUAL CHANT, TYPED REPEATEDLY INTO ZWIFT FORUMS UNTIL ZWIFT CEO ERIC MIN FELT COMPELLED TO RESPOND.

The Zwifter most widely accused of cheating is Eddie Hoole, a South African rider and software engineer who in 2022 appeared to pull off a miraculous feat when he came first in a qualifier for the virtual world championships, which Zwift hosted for cycling's governing body, the UCI. On the hill to the finish, Hoole's power meters showed that he produced 8.5 watts per kilogram for four minutes – a feat that made him look stronger than all of history's Tour de France winners.

ZADA found the data suspicious, and investigated. To verify his exceptional power output, officials asked him to record data as he pedalled up a real-life hill. The results were humbling, and led ZADA to disqualify him and deliver a six-month racing ban. In their review, officials alleged that he deployed a 'man in the middle' cheat, using either software or a device to upgrade his performance data. Their final assessment was coolly withering: "There is no circumstantial evidence that might suggest that the rider is a globally significant, world-class athlete."

Hoole, however, maintains his innocence. "There was no cheating, or data manipulation devices used on my end," he wrote in an email. "I did not do anything other than months of preparation, and good old pedalling of my bicycle."

For Luciano, the corruption on the platform was becoming too much to bear. He was incensed when the cheaters glided past him in the virtual mountains: "I believed that all of us competing on Zwift were doing something beautiful together."

Born in Argentina, Luciano's parents fought the dictator Jorge Rafael Videla; and, he says, they were imprisoned and tortured for their beliefs. Deeply indoctrinated, Luciano developed a "black and white" moral outlook early on. So in February 2022, after some cursory research, he explained and decried the weight cheat on his own WordPress site. He posted a video of himself toggling buttons, lowering his alleged weight while Zwifting. We see his wattage rise, and we watch his dismay blossom in real time. "This," he declares as he pedals and huffs, "is a cheating fucking black hole that I've never seen."

Jaundiced Zwift veterans were rolling their eyes: Luciano's lament was old news. But to the pedalling masses, hurt, sensitive Luciano was *simpatico*. In its first three days online, his video was viewed 800 000 times.

WHEN SOFTWARE EXECUTIVE ERIC MIN launched Zwift a decade ago, indoor bike training was a toilsome affair, in which each rider gutted it out alone in a digital milieu befitting a jail: the screen before them displayed tedious biometric data and no scenery. Min aimed to make the sport "fun" and "social" – and by delivering the twisting, vibrant roads of Watopia, he did just that.

Still, Zwift was destined to become competitive as soon as its second rider came along. There are now hundreds of thousands of people racing on the platform, where the subscriber base has grown 44 percent since 2020; and there are at least a dozen other e-cycling platforms, most of them offering options to compete.

Winners at big online races can earn upwards of US$8 000. In 2020, in advance of the UCI World Championships, Zwift spokesperson Chris Snook told the *New York Times*, "We feel confident in the ability to catch cheaters and to police the races."

But things have changed. Now it seems that Zwift is prioritising neither cheat detection nor elite racing. In 2024, for the first time since it was launched in 2019, Zwift did not host the annual UCI Esports Cycling World Championship. A Saudi brand, MyWhoosh, stepped in and took over.

Some Zwift racing savants, fixated on technical minutiae, question whether Zwift will ever rein in chicanery. Triathlete Ray Maker, the author of cycling tech blog *DC Rainmaker*, has for years pointed out that when Zwift racers upload their required two performance files, one from their smart trainer and the other from a power meter connected to their bike, discrepancies are inevitable, and opportunities for tweaking data abound. Maker has lobbied Zwift for a sleeker platform capable of generating a single, dual-recorded performance file. Zwift has demurred. The company, Maker says, "has erred on the side of pursuing mass-market appeal. They're slow to fix bugs, and they don't want to make things complicated for users."

However, Maker does acknowledge that ZADA is vigilant for the vanishingly small number of Zwift races that feature prize money. He points to the six-month ban Eddie Hoole received as evidence.

AS LUCIANO'S WEIGHT-CHEAT VIDEO BLEW UP in early February 2022, he received a devastating email. Suddenly, Zwift informed him, he was a "Watopian in Review". Because he'd violated a Zwift rule against sharing cheat tactics, he would be invisible to others in races for 30 days and his name wouldn't appear in results. "I fell out of my chair," he says. "I felt excluded, as if my family had rejected me."

With Luciano exiled, #FreeLuciano became a virtual chant, typed repeatedly into Zwift forums until finally, Zwift CEO Eric Min felt compelled to respond. He conferred with Luciano over WhatsApp. Then, on 26 February, he apologised and lifted the ban.

So, the saga was over, right? Wrong. In his statement, Min made Luciano hopeful by promising a "bug-bounty programme" that would reward Zwifters who pointed out platform glitches that facilitated cheating – like, for instance, a now-excised feature that effectively let riders hit 'cruise control' after descending at 70-80km/h, so that they could then climb at that absurd speed.

Min said that details of this new bug-bounty programme would be forthcoming. Luciano waited. And waited. On Zwift's forums, he kept asking about the programme. "Yes," he wrote stoically, "I *am* repetitive, and resilient."

Finally, in December 2022, Min disclosed in a Zwift forum that he would not be implementing the bug-bounty programme after all. "We don't have the appropriate resources," he said.

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THE RISE OF VIRTUAL RACES HAS LED TO ACCUSATIONS OF CHEATING, INCLUDING AT THE US NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS AND WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS.

"Bounties are generally offered only by the biggest tech companies, which we are not." Luciano wrote to Min personally, saying, "I take note of your absolute lack of accountability. At least now it is visible that your word means close to nothing."

Then he shared that message on social media, and found himself savaged. "Move on!" protested one commenter. Another accused him of "getting angry about something that not many people give a shit about". And when Luciano entered Zwift races, people seemed to resent his laser focus on rules. "People would say, 'Oh, Luciano's here,'" he remembers. "And then half the field would leave." He couldn't enjoy the platform anymore.

Mark Cote, Zwift's vice president of content, insists that a bug bounty wasn't needed – the company is constantly ironing out flaws that might aid cheaters. Zwift, he says, receives "thousands and thousands of little niggling comments" about the platform every month. "We assess and prioritise," he says.

For example, racers can only use a trainer that is on a special list, making it impossible for them to cheat with an off-brand model that might inflate their energy output. But, Cote adds, Zwift isn't about to do a full-scale crackdown on cheating. "At an Olympic level," he says, "yeah, that's appropriate. But if you show up for a weekly criterium race, do you really need to get your blood drawn? Ease of entry into cycling and racing is important; we have to focus on how we can help thousands of people get their workout in."

Luciano has little tolerance for that sort of leniency. After Min rescinded the bug bounty, Luciano was so livid he went into overdrive. For three months, for three hours a day, he scrutinised performance data from more than 150 of Zwift's most elite racers. He aimed to show that in the Zwift world, cheating is so pervasive that race results are meaningless.

"I didn't see him much," says Luciano's wife, Andrea Coca Urenda. "He was always on his computer."

Early in 2023, after Luciano finished his research, he cast about for the best way to publicise it. He knew that when compared to global worries such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, Zwift cheating is small potatoes. So he decided against a stone-cold exposé and went instead with high-concept satire, this time producing three YouTube videos that he collectively titled "Zwirkus", each appointed with a tinny, circus-music soundtrack. The second episode asks, "Are Zwifterz Ztronger than UCI Proz?" The videos are funny, and while Luciano succeeds in making his basic point – that Zwift's elites are cheating so rampantly that, based on their watts per kilogram, they appear to be crushing the world's best – he does also get a little too exercised reviewing fine-grained data.

"On Innsbruck KOM," he declaims, referencing a 7.4km Zwift climb to a famed Austrian village, "there are 161 riders who did more than six watts per kilo!" Tadej Pogačar and Jonas Vingegaard are having a decent day when they post such numbers.

But, it turns out, there are very few people who hanker for the minutiae of wattage stats. The video received fewer than 800 views.

WHERE DO CYCLISTS GO WHO SHARE

Luciano's passionate disdain for cheating? A new virtual-racing platform, indieVelo, emerged in June 2023, with the tagline "where the results are credible". Luciano signed up, of course, and there are now more than 25 000 paid subscribers who participate in a twice-weekly, all-comers race series: Monday Monarchy and Wednesday Worlds. Both races are overseen by a legend in cheat detection: George Gilbert.

That's right – indieVelo's founder is none other than the man who chaired ZADA for years. With the help of Björn Ossenbrink, a Canadian coach and physiologist, ZADA called attention to roughly 300 dubious performances – and they outed roughly a dozen bona fide cheaters amid a throng of honest racers befuddled by their equipment. In doing so, they earned high praise from even the most gimlet-eyed Zwift critics. "Those guys leave no stone unturned," says Ray Maker.

But indieVelo isn't a fire-and-brimstone world where an angry overlord casts severe accusations down at suspected cheaters. Rather, it's a platform where Gilbert has quietly sought to foreclose all possibility of lying. Dual recording is built into the platform, and there's real-time cheat detection. If an unknown rider suddenly unleashes an attack worthy of a doped-up Lance Armstrong, software weighs the performance against his 47th-place finish the week prior, and summarily disqualifies him.

According to insiders, a cult-like asceticism prevails on the platform. "The graphics are rather crude," says Luciano, almost proudly. "There are just a few trees." Instead, the focus is on precise simulation of real-life racing. Early in 2024, Gilbert and about 20 indieVelo habitues spent many breathless hours locked in a Discord debate over whether software should identify a rider as 'standing' (and thereby blocking wind for other riders) when their pedalling cadence drops to 55 revolutions per minute.

The typical Zwift user would probably rather eat chalk. But Mark Cote, the Zwift VP, sees indieVelo's arrival as a good thing – a sign that "our sport has matured to where there's room for a platform that focuses on the elite amateur side of things." Even as indieVelo gains in popularity, Zwift will continue to enlist Gilbert and Ossenbrink as cheat-detectors.

Luciano, meanwhile, has become an indieVelo zealot. He has ridden the platform's 500m velodrome loop more than anyone – 12 106 times, at last count. ("I can launch my structured workout and control watts without gradient," he explains.) On indie's Facebook page, he often volunteers answers to questions posed by newcomers. "I'm almost customer support for indieVelo," he says.

In an interview a few months ago, Luciano said that when he wheels to the indieVelo starting line, he feels secure. "The people around me believe in the pillars of fairness, and I trust the platform." He added, "I haven't seen even a single cheater on indieVelo."

But that was then. Inevitably, by the end of 2024, the indieVelo universe became slightly more complex in Luciano's eyes: cheaters had arrived on the platform. He watched as five of them were caught, one by one, *in flagrante delicto*.

"These people," he says with disgust, "they're so used to cheating on Zwift that they think, 'Well, there are rules, but really we can do whatever we want.' Then, on indieVelo, they're caught; and..." – he pauses, savouring the neatness of the equation, the sweet moral clarity – "...they go away. And we never see them on indieVelo again." **B**

THE RIGHT TO RIDE

THEY LED A CYCLING REVOLUTION IN AFGHANISTAN, WHERE WOMEN WERE FORBIDDEN TO RIDE. WHEN THE TALIBAN RETURNED TO POWER, THEIR ONLY HOPE WAS A HARROWING ESCAPE TO AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE.

By **KIM CROSS**

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AFGHANISTAN CYCLING TEAM

Photograph by **DJAMILA GROSSMAN**

▲ ZAKIA MOHAMMADI AND SHANNON GALPIN LEAD TEAM SHAHMAMA ON A TRAINING RIDE IN BAMYAN IN 2015.

Courtesy Steve Bouey

PART I: PIONEERS

The day before the Taliban clamped down on her freedom, a young woman went for a bike ride.

She wore pants and a long-sleeved shirt under a sky-blue cycling jersey. Her ponytail flew behind her like a flag, free of the hijab she usually wore tucked into her helmet. Her smile was shy but also bold, with a pop of red lipstick.

Reihana Mohammadi was 18 years old, a new member of the Afghan National Cycling Team. She lived and trained in Bamyan, a small and peaceful city in the rugged heart of Afghanistan. On this 30km ride, she was thinking about her next big race, three weeks away in Pakistan. She hoped to raise her country's flag in her first international victory.

Riding a team-issue mountain bike, Reihana sailed down a two-lane ribbon of road, through a desert canyon with crumbling walls. Behind her, in a valley framed by peaks, were the ancient cliffs of Bamyan. The city was known for the Bamyan Buddhas, two statues carved into a cliff; created in the 6th century, these statues were older than Islam. One Buddha, regarded as male, was 18 stories tall and named Salsal, which means 'Light Shines through the Universe'. The other was smaller and older. Her name was Shahmama, or 'Queen Mother'.

Salsal and Shahmama had witnessed the rise and fall of one civilization after another: a Buddhist holy site; a Silk Road trading post; a Muslim city of 70 000, with a spirit of peace and progress. These Buddhas had watched over Bamyan for 1 500 years.

Now, in their place, were two voids.

In March 2001, the Taliban denounced the statues as "idols" and "gods of the infidels". Militants from the Islamic fundamentalist group fired at the Buddhas with tanks and artillery. When that failed to fully destroy them, they used explosives, cheering as the statues crumbled in a cloud of dust and smoke. Visible on every ride in Bamyan, the Buddha-voids echoed with absence, a constant reminder of what had been lost.

Pedalling out of the city, Reihana felt a mounting gravity. The air was still and heavy with dust. Such weather made the old women whisper: "Something bad is going to happen..." Locals were gathering in the streets, shoving parcels into trucks. As Reihana rode past, some glanced up and noticed a young woman pedalling a bicycle through the desert. "You're crazy!" they cried in Dari, the native tongue. "The Taliban are very close!"

It was 14 August 2021. On TV screens across the world, maps of Afghanistan showed districts falling to the Taliban as the US withdrew the troops that had occupied the country since 2001. The centre of the country was a bull's-eye of freedom, and in that oasis was Bamyan – an island of peace in a sea of war, shrinking in the rising tide.

Outside Reihana's central province, great cities were under siege: two dozen capitals had fallen in a matter of days. Buildings were burning. Stray bullets were hitting children.

"They will kill you!" people on the roadside shouted. "Don't go on!"

Reihana pedalled harder. Her older sister, Zakia, had fought for this. This was a right that only a decade before did not exist in Afghanistan, one of the last countries in the world where women were forbidden to ride a bicycle. Born in 1993, Zakia Mohammadi was a teenager when she risked her life to challenge this cultural taboo. Her success was so public that death threats drove her out of her country in 2019; she has lived in Germany ever since.

Zakia's absence created a vacuum that inspired the next generation, and Reihana was one of its stars. The sisters were everything the Taliban hated: Hazaras, an ethnic minority persecuted by the Taliban, and Shi'a Muslims, sworn enemies of the Sunni Taliban. They were educated women with minds of their own; women who used bicycles to emancipate other women. They embodied the freedoms women had won in the 20 years since the Taliban were suppressed.

The Taliban considered the sisters – and all female athletes – to be infidels who violated the Qur'an, because the clothes they wore to engage in sports allowed men to see the shape of their bodies.

Reihana rode through waves of dust and dread, training her mind on the coming race instead of the nearing Taliban. Her drive to compete won out over fear.

She finished the ride and went home to the house she shared with her parents, her older brother James, and her little sister Hania. She fell asleep in her room, surrounded by trophies, medals and ribbons. The next morning, her uncle called with a warning: the Taliban were coming.

"Take nothing – just run," her uncle said. "If they find you, they will kill you!"

Reihana darted around her room, collecting papers that identified her as an athlete. In the backyard, she lit them on fire and watched her identity burn. Years of dreams and victories vanished in a plume of smoke.

Her father gathered documents while her mother packed water and snacks. They would drive four hours to Kabul, where they could stay with family and try to catch a flight out of the country. Reihana's heart ached to leave her bike. Would she ever see it again? There wasn't much time to wonder.

Taking nothing more than a backpack each, the family of five piled into the car and sped through the gates of Bamyan, past trucks full of Talib soldiers streaming in. Fighters dusty from battle rode in pairs on motorbikes, the passengers carrying rocket-propelled grenade launchers slung over their shoulders.

In the back seat, Reihana hid her red lips behind a wisp of white scarf. Through the window, she scanned her city for any sign of resistance. Where were the Afghan soldiers? Where were the police? As they drove past the police station, she saw that the Afghan flag, with its stripes of black and red and green, no longer flew over the building. In its place was the black-and-white Taliban flag.

It's over, she thought. It's finished. Twenty years of rights and dreams and freedoms had begun to crumble.

"THEY WILL KILL YOU!" PEOPLE ON THE ROADSIDE SHOUTED. "DON'T GO ON!"

THE FIRST RIDES / Zakia Mohammadi was born on the fourth of July in Iran. Her mother, then 16, was the daughter of Afghan refugees who had fled the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. Her father, born in Afghanistan, had also grown up in Iran. Zakia, their first, was eight weeks early, so small and quiet that her mother said, "She didn't even know how to cry."

When Zakia was five, her father gave her a little red bike and taught her how to ride. She burned laps around the family's yard, but her parents didn't think it was safe for a girl to ride in public. It wasn't illegal in Iran, but it was unusual. A bit taboo. Some believed a bicycle seat could threaten a woman's chastity.

In Iran, the family enjoyed luxuries they didn't have in Afghanistan: good roads, decent schools that girls could attend, better infrastructure and order. Life in Iran was safer, and in many ways easier. But people there yelled, "Afghani, why are you here? Go back to your own country!" That wasn't freedom.

On 11 September 2001, al-Qaeda operatives hijacked commercial jets and turned them into weapons. The world watched the twin towers in Manhattan collapse in a cloud of dust and smoke. A month later, US-led international troops landed in Afghanistan – where the Taliban had provided sanctuary to al-Qaeda – to wage war on the terrorist group and its leader, Osama bin Laden. By late 2001, the Taliban were in retreat.

In 2003, Zakia's parents felt it was safe to move back home to Afghanistan. Zakia was 10. By then she had a little brother named James, and a baby sister who cried a lot: Reihana.

Their father opened a bike shop in Bamyan. As a boy he'd played soccer, and trained in kung fu. As a young adult he fell in love with downhill skiing. He didn't yet view cycling as a sport; rather, it was a cheap, fast and reliable mode of transportation. For men.

Nine years later, Zakia was walking in Bamyan one day when she noticed something shocking: a young woman on a bike. Not training. Just getting from here to there. As if this were perfectly normal. Zakia flagged her down. That's how Zakia met Zahra.

Zahra Hussaini had a fierce intensity that burned in dark eyes framed by dark-rimmed glasses. She was 19, but she carried herself like someone much older. A college student, she'd started biking as a faster, easier way to get to class and work.

Most parents in Afghanistan never would have allowed this; but Zahra was an orphan. The youngest of three daughters, she'd been born in Iran to refugees who had left Afghanistan in the 1990s to get away from the Taliban. Zahra was 40 days old when her mother died. At age two, she lost her father. Her older sister raised her unconventionally, cutting her hair short and encouraging her to enjoy the same freedoms as boys.

To earn money, the sisters wove carpets. Six-year-old Zahra begged to go to school. They made a deal: If Zahra wove so many rows a day,

ZAKIA HELPS ATTACH REIHANA'S NUMBER BEFORE THE AFGHANISTAN WOMEN'S ROAD CHAMPIONSHIPS IN 2022. THE EVENT WAS HELD IN AIGLE, SWITZERLAND, BECAUSE OF THE TALIBAN'S RETURN TO POWER.

Photograph by **DJAMILA GROSSMAN**

she was allowed to go. She thrived in and outside the classroom, a "playful and stubborn child" who loved playing soccer and sprinting through neighbourhood alleys with local girls and boys.

One of the things the boys enjoyed most was riding bicycles. Zahra was eight or nine when she decided to teach herself. She borrowed an adult-sized bicycle and stretched to reach the pedals. She crashed a lot, and scraped herself up, and made her sister worry.

"It seems my stubbornness helped me finally learn to ride it," Zahra says.

When Zahra was 13, she and her sister moved to Afghanistan. At 18, she moved to Bamyan, where she got a job producing radio shows about women's rights and freedom of expression. She also worked for Habiba Sarabi, the first female governor of Bamyan, taking minutes in meetings with male officials. She enrolled at Bamyan University to study archaeology.

On her 40-minute walk to class, she noticed boys zipping past her on bikes. What took her hours on foot took them minutes on wheels. It didn't seem fair.

So, Zahra got a bicycle. She had never seen a woman riding a bike in Afghanistan. It was 2012 – 11 years after the Taliban had been driven into hiding by international troops. Some elders remembered Afghan women riding bicycles back in the 60s, but hard evidence of that had been destroyed.

The stories, however, endured.

After that first meeting in the streets of Bamyan, Zakia and Zahra forged a unique friendship. Zahra was more of a tomboy and an activist: outspoken, scholarly, a confident leader. Zakia, a natural athlete, was softer-spoken and sweet-faced, with earnest eyes and a peacemaker's strength. They shared a love for speed.

"We like to go fast!" Zakia says.

Other girls saw them and wanted to learn. Zakia and Zahra began teaching them. Soon, 10 girls were sharing one bike. Zakia's father donated two more from his shop. Most of the roads in Bamyan were unpaved or riddled with potholes, so they practised near the governor's house, where the road was nice and smooth. They weren't racing, then. There was no team or club. They were simply girls teaching other girls a skill that expanded their world. Cycling was a way to go further and faster – to school, or a job, or the market.

"Our wish was to go to and from places as we pleased," Zahra says. "To have our own freedom."

Riding made them feel "happy and scared", Zahra says. Happy because freedom is joyful; scared because of the fury their riding provoked in men. Boys hurled rocks. Old men sneered and yelled. The mullahs – religious leaders – preached that what they were doing was wrong. Sinful. Obscene. A local mosque posted signs: Beware! Do not let your girls join this group!

"The men, when they saw us – they thought it was shameful," Zakia says. There's no bitterness in her voice; she's just stating the facts. "They decided it's not good for us, because we are Muslim."

They kept riding.

THE LARGER OF THE TWO VOIDS LEFT AFTER THE TALIBAN DESTROYED THE BAMYAN BUDDHAS IN 2001.

Getty Images

THE FIRST RACE / Some of the boys in Bamyan saw Zakia and Zahra, and instead of throwing stones, decided to join them. Soon girls and boys were riding together through Bamyan's streets.

In 2013, the group heard about a ride that went from Kabul to Panjshir Province, about 120km away. Most of the girls stayed in Bamyan, but Zakia and Zahra decided to go. Zakia's mother worried, because the road passed through a conservative town that didn't like Hazaras. But Zakia reassured her: they'd be riding with boys from Bamyan, including Zakia's younger brother.

The day of the ride was rainy and cold. Most of the riders wore ski masks, which covered their hair and faces. Zahra was usually fearless, but this day was an exception. "To tell you the truth, I was scared," she says. Not of the ride, the risk of a crash, or getting harassed; she feared what it would mean if they failed. "I was afraid that if Zakia or I were injured, it would affirm what others said about how girls shouldn't be riding bikes," she recalls. "I didn't want to give them any evidence to support this."

The Bamyan boys supported the girls like domestiques, taking turns pulling and drafting. Zakia and Zahra finished the ride feeling confident and empowered. Instead of being heckled, they were given medals and celebrated as the only two female riders.

A few months later, Zakia and Zahra entered their first race, a road event in Bamyan. It was another cold day, and Zakia and Zahra pulled on their ski masks. They wheeled their mountain bikes – the only bikes they had – to the start.

The race began, and their knobbly tyres hummed on the tar as they jockeyed for position. None of their competitors knew they were racing against girls. Zakia pulled ahead of the boys, feeling the rush and joy of speed, a bird uncaged in the wind. She crossed the finish line, caught her breath, and slowly peeled off her mask. When everyone saw her flushed face, they gasped.

A girl had raced – and won?!

And on a mountain bike. An old one.

THE FIRST TEAM / In Bamyan, the community's mind began to change when Zakia and Zahra started winning races. Girls begged their parents to let them learn how to ride, and some of the parents obliged. Men and boys started yelling good things at them for a change; Afghan men cheering Afghan women in sports was itself a revolution. But the mullahs were still outraged. They called the girls sinners and infidels.

In every Afghan community, this council of elders holds a great deal of power; if anyone wants to do anything, it's important to get their blessing. When the mullahs heckled the girls in the streets, Zakia and Zahra stopped and tried to talk to them. It wasn't the riding that bothered the mullahs; it was *how* they were riding – so brazen and proud, out in the open for all to see. In other sports, women competed in gendered courts or gyms, walled off from men's view. But cyclists trained in public, on roads.

It was also what they were wearing. Without a skirt or tunic, the shape of their bodies was visible. Even though they wore long sleeves and pants, the suggestion of a womanly silhouette might elicit sinful thoughts in men.

Zakia and Zahra explained that cycling wasn't just a sport: the bicycle was a vehicle for the freedom of travel. Many girls had to walk two hours to get to school. If they could ride instead, perhaps more girls could get an education. If women could ride to work, they could have access to more jobs.

The mullahs nodded and conceded a little. It took many conversations, but eventually the mullahs grudgingly backed off. They never actually came out in support, but they finally stopped bringing it up. Zakia and Zahra made T-shirts with their own slogan: *Haq Barai Radan*. The Right to Ride.

In 2013, a year after they met, Zakia and Zahra founded a cycling club and team for girls and boys. Zahra, the archaeology student, came up with the name: Salsal & Shahmama. She also organised 'A Night with Buddha' – an evening of cultural events to honour the legacy of the Buddhas. The statues no longer stood; but what they stood for did.

After hearing about Zakia and Zahra, an American woman came to Bamyan to meet them. A tall, blonde, blue-eyed cyclist from Colorado, Shannon Galpin had travelled for years in Afghanistan. As a foreigner, she was treated like an 'honorary man', allowed to travel alone, ride a bike, and talk as an equal with men.

Zakia and Zahra took Shannon on a ride through Bamyan, where locals stared and waved. They rode laps around fields, raced each other through the streets, and braked to a stop in front of the Buddha cliffs.

A group of young, smiling boys crowded around them, and a few girls crouched nearby. Zahra nodded at the kids and turned to Shannon: "Girls deserve to have the same opportunities as boys," she said. "Whether that's education, or the right to ride a bike."

Shannon saw that Zakia and Zahra's bikes were old and poorly maintained. Two months later, she returned to Bamyan with eight new mountain bikes – for Zakia, Zahra, and six other girls. They were part of a shipment of 65 bicycles donated by Liv Cycling for the Afghan National Team, a separate initiative Shannon was helping develop in Kabul. Founded and managed by men, this team was different from the Salsal & Shahmama club in Bamyan, which was a grassroots movement led by teenage girls.

Shannon tried to introduce the two groups, but it didn't go well. The male coach of the national team was dismissive, and Zakia and Zahra didn't need 'help' from some man to do what they were already doing on their own. So the two teams developed independently from each other. Shannon helped them both.

JUST BEFORE SUNSET, REIHANA FELT AN EXPLOSION.

On 8 August 2014, Zakia and Zahra helped organise the Tour de Bamyan, the first co-ed cycling race in Afghanistan. In tandem with non-profit groups in the city, they planned the event and mapped a course. They enlisted men and boys as officials, course marshals and cheerleaders, making them allies in the process. Zakia's father and brother were two of the Tour's biggest supporters. "We wanted to make it an annual event," Zahra says, "to demonstrate the equality and freedom in Bamyan, which could be a model for other cities."

A year later, Reihana entered the Tour de Bamyan. It was her first race. Feeling shy but also bold, she pushed herself through 20km of nerves and pain and glory. When she pedalled across the finish line – not first, but not last – she tasted victory.

During the podium ceremony, the riders gathered at a small café in front of the Buddha caves. Zahra called the crowd to attention and waved Reihana over. "She's the youngest participant and the youngest member of her team," Zahra said as Reihana, who was 12, blushed and smiled. "She did well today. I am proud of her."

Six years later, on her dusty training ride in August 2021, Reihana tried to focus on her upcoming race in Pakistan instead of the encroaching Taliban. She felt anxious, unsure what the future held. But she never imagined this would be her final ride in Afghanistan.

Reihana was the daughter of a bike shop owner, heir to her sister's legacy. Cycling was her birthright. It was the bedrock of her dreams: to race in the Tour de France Femmes, to compete in the Olympic Games, or maybe one day wear the rainbow stripes of a world champion.

After driving to Kabul, Reihana and her family, including James and Hania, locked themselves in the home of a relative. The house had a small yard with trees, and through them Reihana could see the stars. The Qur'an says Allah created the stars to help people navigate the depths of darkness; Reihana gazed up at them now, seeking comfort.

If she stayed, she would lose her freedom. The Taliban would forbid her to play sports, have a job, or go anywhere without a man. But if she left, she would lose her home and the life she loved. Either way, her dreams and freedoms would crumble. My dreams, my achievements, my medals, she thought. Everything destroyed in one day.

Her sister Zakia, in Germany, reached out to Shannon Galpin.

PART 2: REFUGEES

In Scotland, Shannon's phone was exploding with messages from Afghan girls and women. *Please help us!* She was living in Edinburgh, raising a teenage daughter as a single mom. Through years of work as an activist, Shannon knew how far Afghan women's rights had come in two decades. Now she was watching it all unravel. All across Afghanistan, female athletes were deleting social media accounts, burning photographs and certificates, digging holes to bury their trophies and medals. Destroying the evidence. Erasing their identities.

Their lives were in real danger. Nooria Tabesh, a member of the national handball team, had been gunned down in her home in April. Cyclists were at heightened risk because of the very nature of cycling. "It's the one sport that is intrinsically tied to women's rights," Shannon says. "It represents independent mobility."

Shannon had zero experience with evacuations, but during eight years of work in Afghanistan she had been smuggled in the boot of a car down mine-riddled roads where the Taliban had burned police checkpoints. She had felt the blast of a suicide bomb shatter the windows of her guesthouse in Kabul. She wrote a list of people in "imminent danger", adding Reihana and her family.

Such lists were forming all over the world. Created by governments, non-profit groups, athletic federations and individuals, evacuation lists were culled into flight manifests that served in place of plane tickets. In the desperation of triage, the lists were constantly changing.

As a member of the national team, outspoken and successful, Reihana was on many lists. But what about her little sister, her brother and her parents? They had to leave together if they wanted to stay together: Shannon had them on a US State Department list, but they weren't on a flight manifest yet. She told them to be patient, to stay in hiding until they were called to board. The airport in Kabul was convulsing with panicked crowds. People were clinging to the bellies of jets accelerating down the runway. Bodies fell from the sky.

Reihana and her family couldn't wait. Blocks from the airport, they found the streets choked by rivers of people and trucks filled with Taliban soldiers. They ditched their car and were swept into the confluence. When they found the airport gate locked, the people amassed like water behind a dam. Even if Reihana and her family could find a way through, they didn't have a flight to board. They returned to the car, went back into hiding, and prepared to try again. Day after day, they tried and failed. The crowds at the airport were impenetrable. Planes were taking off with empty seats because passengers could not reach them.

Outside the gate, a young mother – also a cyclist – clutched her little girl to her chest as a fog of tear gas swirled around them. Her toddler screamed as her face and body began to swell. Shannon's phone lit up with yet another cry for help:

If not today
And I cannot cross the gate
I will suicide

REIHANA MOHAMMADI DURING HER LAST RIDE IN BAMYAN.

Courtesy Reihana Mohammadi

ZAHRA / In Kabul, the Taliban were everywhere – standing on tanks, swarming the streets, wielding Soviet-era guns and pounding on doors to find infidels. As the capital fell, the president fled his country.

Zahra was living in Kabul with her husband. She had a high-profile job as a human rights worker and as an aide to a prominent female politician; she worked to build the very things the Taliban wished to destroy. It wasn't safe to go home, so she and her husband met at a friend's house.

In the living room, she flipped through a stack of photos she'd brought with her: snapshots with her husband at 'A Night with Buddha'; pictures of her riding with the girls in Bamyan; portraits of the Salsal & Shahmama team lined up in crisp white jerseys. Unable to start a fire indoors, she ripped up the photographs and drowned the shreds in a bucket of water.

Zahra and her husband had to leave before they were killed. After more than 10 trips in vain to the airport, they realised their only chance was to drive to a border crossing. But all the borders were closed: Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran. Even if the crossings had been open, Zahra and her husband couldn't cross without visas. Government offices were closed. The roads were a minefield of checkpoints.

Late one night, Zahra and her husband boarded a bus to Kandahar, about 500km south-west of Kabul. The birthplace of the Taliban and Afghanistan's capital before 9/11, Kandahar was the city where, just days before, the Taliban had opened the doors of the prison to swell their ranks of insurgents.

This was dangerous Taliban country. But it was also close to a stretch of the border with Pakistan known to be 'porous'. Zahra's bus was filled with colleagues from the human rights organisation where she worked. Several times, the bus was stopped at Taliban checkpoints where men with guns climbed aboard and scanned the solemn faces. Seeing civilians, they let the bus pass. Zahra and her husband spent the night in Kandahar, coordinating with smugglers who could help them cross the border into Pakistan.

The next day, the border crossing in the town of Spin Boldak was churning with anxious crowds. Zahra wrapped her arms around her husband's waist so they wouldn't be forced apart. At the checkpoint, the Pakistan border police asked for their papers. Zahra and her husband pulled out their passports, but they had no visas. Their passage was denied. Would they have to go back to Kabul? Would the Taliban learn who they were?

Just then, for a fleeting moment, the border checkpoint was left unattended. Zahra's husband grabbed her hand. Quickly, quietly, they slipped through.

On the other side, in Pakistan, they didn't know where to go. They walked down the road for 20 minutes and encountered other Afghans gathering amid a cluster of cars. They climbed into a car with strangers and were driven to Quetta, a border town where Zahra's sister-in-law lived. They could hide out for a while. But they still weren't safe: Quetta flew the Taliban flag.

REIHANA / On 26 August, Reihana and her family tried once more to reach the airport in Kabul. Again, they found themselves blocked by the crowds. They joined the masses outside Abbey Gate, the only airport gate still open.

Just before sunset, Reihana felt an explosion, a blast so loud it shook the ground and rattled the air in her chest. Babies were screaming, women were crying, and Reihana felt caught in the force of the crowd as everyone started to run.

"Don't go! There was a bomb!" people shouted. "You will die!"

The crowd turned like a tide, and its current was strong. Reihana linked arms with Hania so her little sister wouldn't be swept away. But the crush of people broke their grasp and Hania was swallowed up. Reihana scanned the sea of people for her little sister's eyes. All she saw were unfamiliar faces, warped with terror, streaked with blood, some attached to bodies so broken they were hauled through the streets in wheelbarrows.

Reihana and her brother found the nearest door and pounded. The door opened, and they were led into a private Pashtun home. Pashtuns are one of the country's largest ethnic groups and have a history of violent oppression against Hazaras. But this Pashtun family offered them water, food and a safe place to rest. Someone found Hania and brought her to the house. Reihana threw her arms around her little sister and wept.

The suicide bombing, claimed by ISIS, killed around 200 people, most of them Afghan civilians. Its plume of smoke rose like a warning flag, visible for kilometres.

In Scotland, Shannon Galpin was sleeping two hours a night, clutching a phone that haemorrhaged cries for help. Plan after plan fell through. She had Reihana and her family on a flight manifest, but needed a bus that could get them through the mob at the gate. Other buses had been circling the airport for days, unable to pass through. Thousands of Afghans cleared to leave were being left behind.

Shannon and an army of lawyers were working around the clock, across borders and time zones, to help them. But the window of opportunity was closing fast. Sweden, Spain, Canada, Germany and Australia concluded their evacuation efforts. Britain stopped taking applications. The last American soldiers would depart in just four days.

After the airport suicide bombing, Reihana and her family went into lockdown. Only her brother, James, would emerge to buy food in Kabul, dressed discreetly in shalwar kameez: traditional pants and a long tunic. Some nights, the sound of gunfire echoed through the sky.

One day, Reihana's phone rang with a call from an unfamiliar number. She declined, but the stranger kept calling. Finally, she answered.

"I know who you are," a man's voice said. "I know what you did and what you are doing. I know you're still in Afghanistan."

Reihana said nothing.

"It's shameful for you to ride a bike. If I find you, I will kill you."

Oceans and continents away, Shannon and the lawyers had finally worked out a plan. On 20 October, what would be their final morning in Kabul, Reihana and her family rose at 4.30am. Drivers hired by Shannon shuttled them to a meeting point, where they boarded a bus that drove them to the Pakistan border. By late morning, they reached the Torkham border crossing the Khyber Pass. Their papers were in order. Reihana, who wore a hijab on this day, handed her passport to a Pakistani border official who asked to see her face. She pulled back the hijab like a curtain and beamed. For once, she had forgotten her red lipstick.

"Are you happy to go to Pakistan?" the official asked.

"If it's safer," she said, "yes!"

Reihana and her family walked across the border. Sixty-six days had passed since they'd sped through the gates of Bamyan.

In Pakistan, their phones no longer worked. But they'd been given a code, a call-and-response, to identify the man who would transport them to a safe house.

"Red," one of them said.

"Monkey," came the reply.

They climbed into Red Monkey's car.

A man whose name they would never know drove them 240km to Islamabad, where Shannon had arranged a safe house.

▲ ZAKIA, CENTRE LEFT, DURING A RIDE WITH OTHER WOMEN IN 2014 IN BAMYAN.

Photograph by **JENNY NICHOLS**

ZAHRA / Nine hundred kilometres south-west of Islamabad, Zahra and her husband were stranded in Quetta, the border town populated with Taliban. It wasn't safe to leave the house.

Zahra had a letter from Sweden that offered an apartment in Stockholm and a two-year scholarship as a writer in residence within the International Cities of Refuge Network. If she and her husband could support themselves after two years, they could be permanent residents. But she had to file the paperwork at a Swedish embassy – in person – and the nearest embassy was in Islamabad, a 12-hour drive on roads patrolled by agents looking for Afghans without papers. Zahra wasn't willing to risk deportation.

An international network of women, coordinated by Shannon from Scotland, coalesced to solve the problem. Through an underground network of Hazara living in Pakistan, they appealed to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. With papers proving her refugee status, Zahra couldn't be deported. This gave her the security to make the trip to Islamabad. At the Swedish embassy there, Zahra sat for a photograph and rolled her fingerprints. Soon after, she learned that Reihana and her family were also in Islamabad. There wasn't much time, but she knew she had to see them. She wanted to pay respects to Zakia and Reihana's parents.

On a warm autumn day in 2021, just days before flying to Sweden, Zahra and her husband took a taxi to the safe house where Reihana and her family were staying. Over lunch, they shared their stories of escape and found comfort in the common threads. The future was uncertain and the past was not even past. They didn't know when or where or how they would see each other again. Zahra embraced Reihana one last time and said what mattered in the moment: "I'm so happy that you're safe."

▲ ZAHRA HUSSAINI IN STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN, OCTOBER 2022.

Photograph by **FELIX ODELL**

EPILOGUE

In March 2022, Zahra and her husband produced 'A night with Buddha' at a theatre in Stockholm, where they live and work as permanent residents. It was an evening of dance, poetry and discussion, honouring Salsal & Shahmama.

Zahra thinks a lot about Afghanistan, and the women who have lost their freedoms. In Sweden she is safe, but she doesn't feel free. She hopes that sharing her story will help people see a more nuanced Afghanistan. She dreams of a day when she and other women can return and ride. It's been more than three years. So much has changed in such a short time, but she dreams of the possibility. Dreams are the stars without which the human soul is nothing more than night.

Shannon Galpin continued evacuating Afghans for more than a year, struggling to raise money when the war in Ukraine made Afghanistan old news. Getting Reihana and her family out was just one of 155 evacuations she managed directly. She credits a constellation of individuals – almost all of them women – who transcended international borders to help other women survive.

In November 2021, Reihana and her family landed in Germany. They were taken to a house in Penzberg, a small city in Bavaria where they would begin their new life as refugees. A van pulled up to the house. Zakia, who had not seen her family in two years, emerged with wet eyes and open arms. Reunited at last, the sisters embraced. The tears were bittersweet.

Reihana and her family live together in Bavaria. Zakia, who lives in Munich, got engaged last year. She comes to visit most weekends.

The German law firm that helped them relocate made a documentary film about their saga. A stranger in Switzerland, moved by the story, bought road bikes for Reihana and her brother James. The law firm contributed a shiny new mountain bike as a gift for their little sister Hania, who celebrated her 12th birthday shortly after moving to Germany. But Reihana no longer has the heart to ride. Now 21, she speaks the best English in her family, so she handles all the paperwork and meetings with German authorities. Her dreams of studying astronomy have been replaced by plans for a business degree. She's trying to get a good job, which is not easy for an Afghan refugee.

James, too, is searching for work. Her father works at a bike shop and her mother is taking classes to learn German and English.

"When I ride bikes now, I don't feel as happy as I did in Bamyan," Reihana says. "It feels so different here."

Reihana keeps in touch with her former teammates through texts and calls. They live scattered across seven countries. They miss riding together in Bamyan, pressing against the wind. "Life in foreign countries is really hard," she says. "Everybody is having mental issues. Depression."

She misses her village, how people would wave when she pedalled by on a bicycle. "In Afghanistan, we were so special," she says.

Some summer mornings, when she wakes up in her room to the first kiss of sunshine, Reihana feels a warm breeze through her window and feels like she is in Bamyan.

Then she remembers. **B**

Shannon Galpin** continues to assist Afghanistan's women cyclists. To find out more, search 'Support the Bamyan Women Cyclists in Exile' at **fundly.com

PAINT YOUR BIKE

A DIY GUIDE TO CUSTOM-PAINTING YOUR BIKE AT HOME

BY **DAN CHABANOV**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **THOMAS HENGGE**

SOMETIMES, A NEW PAINT JOB CAN MEAN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN OLD BIKE TAKING UP SPACE IN YOUR GARAGE, AND A BICYCLE YOU WANT TO RIDE EVERY DAY.

Or maybe you want to treat your child to a custom-painted creation? Or you have a spare frame to turn into a commuter, or the colour you thought was cool a few years ago no longer matches your style – these are all great reasons to repaint a bike.

Like everything in cycling, a custom paint job can be as expensive as you want it to be. But I'm not trying to convince you to send your neglected frame or your kid's beloved bike off for a professional paint job. Resprays by professionals can easily run you almost as much as a brand-new bike.

Instead, consider doing it yourself. While it's almost impossible to achieve professional-level results at home, as I discovered, you can get pretty close if you're diligent and don't mind a bit of trial and error.

Your first and most important step is planning and preparation. Painting a bike at home is mostly prep work, so that the exciting part – the actual painting – goes as smoothly as possible.

And remember: repaints, whether DIY or done by professionals, often void manufacturers' warranties. So establish your brand's policies before stripping and painting your bike. According to Will Hochschild, Trek's Paint Manager, "The big concern is what is done to prep the frame for paint. Sanding and chemical stripping could potentially weaken the frame, and would therefore void our warranty."

[redacted]

DON'T RUSH! PREPPING THE FRAME FOR PAINT IS TIME-CONSUMING BUT CRUCIAL TO THE FINAL OUTCOME.

1. PREPARE THE FRAME

First, if the bike you're painting is built up, you should disassemble it completely for the best results. All parts and hardware, down to the derailleur hanger, must be removed from the frame. If your bike uses linkages, pivots and press-fit bearings, these should be taken off the frame (it's a good opportunity to service your bearings, too).

Removing certain parts (such as bottom brackets, head set cups or bearings) will require special tools. If you don't have them, your local bike shop can remove these parts for you.

Remove suspension components from the frame if you're painting a mountain bike. Painting the shock or fork will require full tear-downs of each. It's doable at home, but again requires specialised knowledge and specific tools.

Once every component is removed, thoroughly clean the frame to ensure it's ready to be painted. Chris Namba of Spray.Bike, a company that makes bike-specific paint, recommends cleaning with soapy water and then alcohol. Clean as many times as needed to ensure all grease and surface contaminants have been removed.

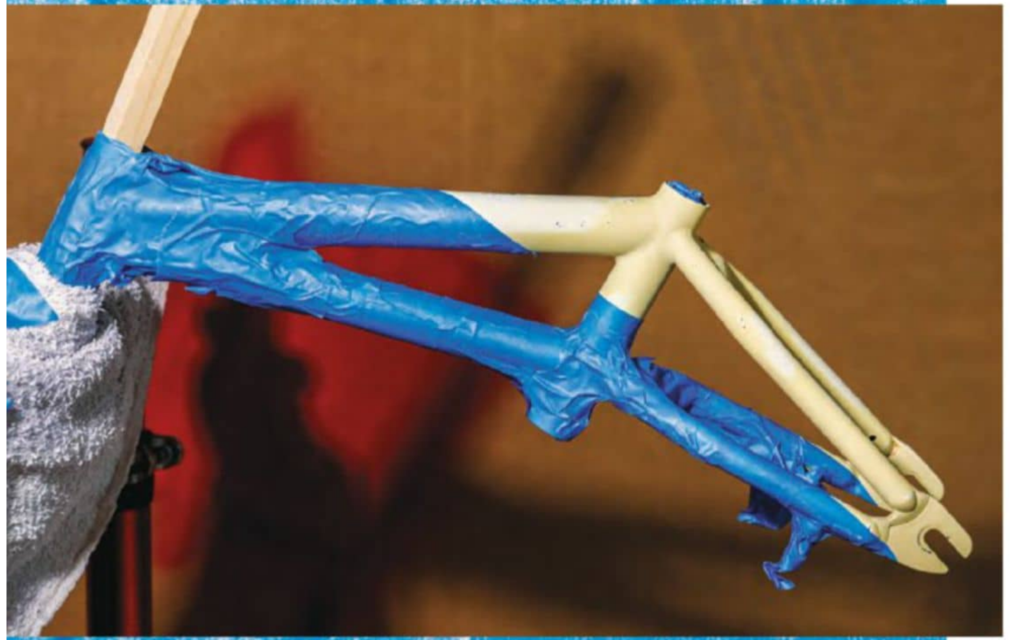
After cleaning the frame, lightly wet-sand it with 400-grit sandpaper (if the surface you're painting isn't bare aluminium, steel or carbon). Sand only enough to create a texture on the surface. You don't want to completely remove the paint or sand to bare material; that would require you to apply fresh primer. Pro tip from Namba: "Always wet-sand. It makes the sandpaper last longer, and gives a smoother and more even surface."

Once sanding is complete, clean your frame again using rubbing alcohol and a lint-free towel. Remember, you don't want any unwanted material on the surface that would prevent paint from adhering.

[redacted]

Next, use painter's tape to carefully and diligently mask off any surface that needs to remain unpainted. To protect bearing surfaces and threads, stuff the bottom bracket shell and bottle-boss holes with tape. Do the same to the head tube, seat tube, and disc-brake tabs. The more care and attention you spend on this step, the easier it is to reassemble the bicycle after painting, because you won't need to remove excess paint from these surfaces.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of the previous two steps in achieving a high-quality outcome. Don't be afraid to spend way more time than you think cleaning and prepping your frame. And the same goes for masking. Let your inner perfectionist out; it will pay off in the end.



2. SET UP YOUR PAINTING AREA

After cleaning and masking the frame, prepare the area where you're going to paint it.

You'll want to paint in a well-ventilated spot, but somewhere out of the breeze. Locations such as a garage with the door open completely, or a courtyard with walls to shield you from the wind, are good options. If you don't have access to this kind of space, pick a relatively windless day.

Similar to preparing to paint a room at home, you should protect the area. Hang up and put down some drop cloths. You can get disposable plastic ones at any hardware store.

3. CHOOSE YOUR PAINT

When painting frames at home, we recommend using aerosol paint in a can rather than a spray gun. Aerosol paint is self-contained, fairly inexpensive, and easy to use. Spray guns produce high-quality results but are more suitable for a professional paint shop environment.

It's worth pointing out that stock paint on bikes from the factory is typically very good, largely because bike factories paint thousands of frames. "We also test our paints for UV, humidity, impact and solvent resistance," says Trek's Hochschild. "But the main difference is probably the equipment. We use expensive paint guns and down-draft booths that help keep the frame as clean as possible during painting."

While it's unlikely you can access the kind of equipment that large manufacturers use, there are things you can do to set yourself up for the best possible outcome when painting your bike. You should avoid the basic spray paint sold at the big-box hardware stores; instead, head to an art shop. Look for a low-pressure can: the slower the paint comes out, the easier it will be to work with.

It's important to pick a high-quality paint. "The problem with 'normal' spray paint is that the ingredients have always been a race to the bottom. [Most companies] just use the cheapest pigment and binder, to get the price of the can down," Namba told me. "This results in cans that are dribbly and prone to inconsistent spraying."

Spray.Bike has an excellent range of bike-specific products, but unfortunately they're not available in South Africa yet. As an alternative, give Montana paint a try – it's available from specialist art shops, and online from *shelflife.co.za*.

Remember – whatever paint you end up choosing – for best results, avoid mixing paint brands (or even lines of product), because different paints can react poorly together.

The last step before you start painting is to secure your frame so you can paint it without having to hold it. A tried-and-true method is using a wooden dowel. With the dowel clamped in a bike stand, hang the frame on the dowel through the head tube. Alternatively, you can thread a string through the head tube and hang the frame from the stand. Be sure to completely cover up the stand, especially if it features telescoping parts that allow the stand to fold or adjust.

TIPS AND TRICKS FOR A PAINT JOB TO BE PROUD OF

- Practise on something other than the bike. Cardboard tubes are great for approximating the shape of a bike tube. Get a feel for how the paint sprays, and dial in your spray distance.

- Start at the top of the frame and work your way down. This way, you're not getting overspray on areas you've already painted.

- Anytime you're about to apply paint to a frame, first spray the can away from the frame. Sometimes an uneven discharge comes out initially, or the paint sprays with more acetone than paint. Make a few test sprays, to be sure the paint is well-mixed and is landing smoothly on your test surface.

- To achieve a complicated, multicolour paint job with masking, you must plan it out. Chris Namba from Spray.Bike recommends that you think in reverse: whatever you want on top must be painted first, and you cover up as you go. "I always do logos first," he says. "I find this method best with aerosols, and especially with lots of layers. I know professional paint shops paint them on top at the end but they are usually painting with a gun where the layers are thinner, and it also requires sanding between layers."

- When masking over paint, give it at least six hours to cure before doing so. The less time you allow the paint to cure, the more you risk pulling the paint up with the masking tape when you remove it.

- After you've painted a new area, peeling the mask should be done after about 30 minutes to an hour. Waiting too long can lead to the paint curing to the mask and tearing unevenly when the mask is removed.

- Stick to soapy water when you're cleaning your newly painted frame, and avoid using degreasers, alcohol, acetone, white spirit or petrol, which can all cause the paint to react and soften, since their primary ingredient is acetone.

- Get creative! Try spraying through lace, like cheap nylon lace curtains: You can layer it like a stencil and it looks 3D when you start putting folds in it. "With these kinds of paint techniques, there's no right or wrong – it always looks sick!"

CHRIS NAMBA LOVES THE ENDLESS CREATIVITY THAT'S POSSIBLE WITH THE DIY APPROACH AND A BIT OF PRACTICE.

4.

PAINT THE FRAME

Finally! It's time to paint your frame. Check the instructions for your specific paint can. (Some cans require shaking for as long as three minutes before use.) Then, check how far away you should hold the can while spraying; this distance varies between brands. Test-spray your cans before starting on your frame.

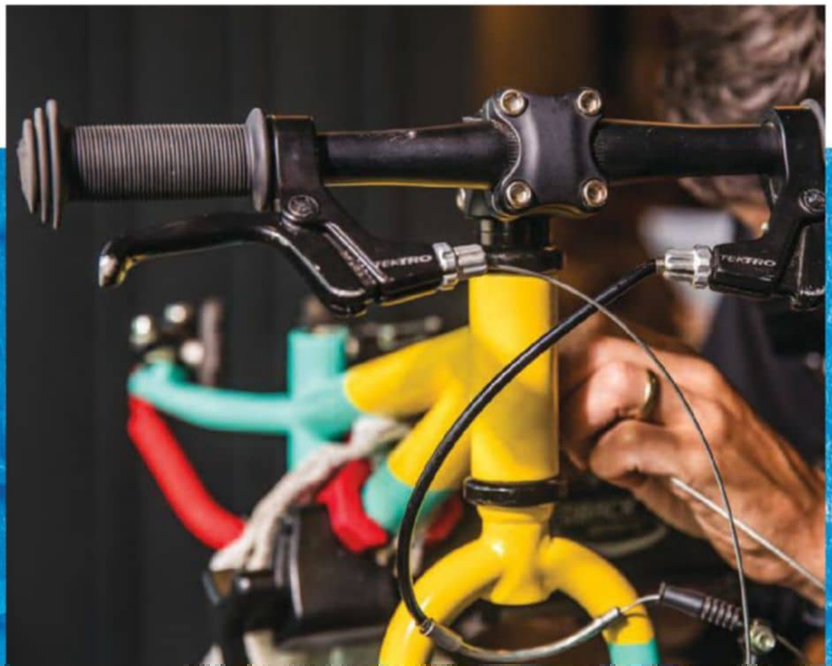
Spray the paint on as evenly as you can. Keep your hand moving at a steady pace while spraying. Apply only one coat at a time. Allow the paint to dry between coats; check the specific instructions on your can for how long that should take. Once you're happy with the result, check the cure time for the paint you used – and double it. You won't over-cure the paint, so it makes no sense to be impatient.

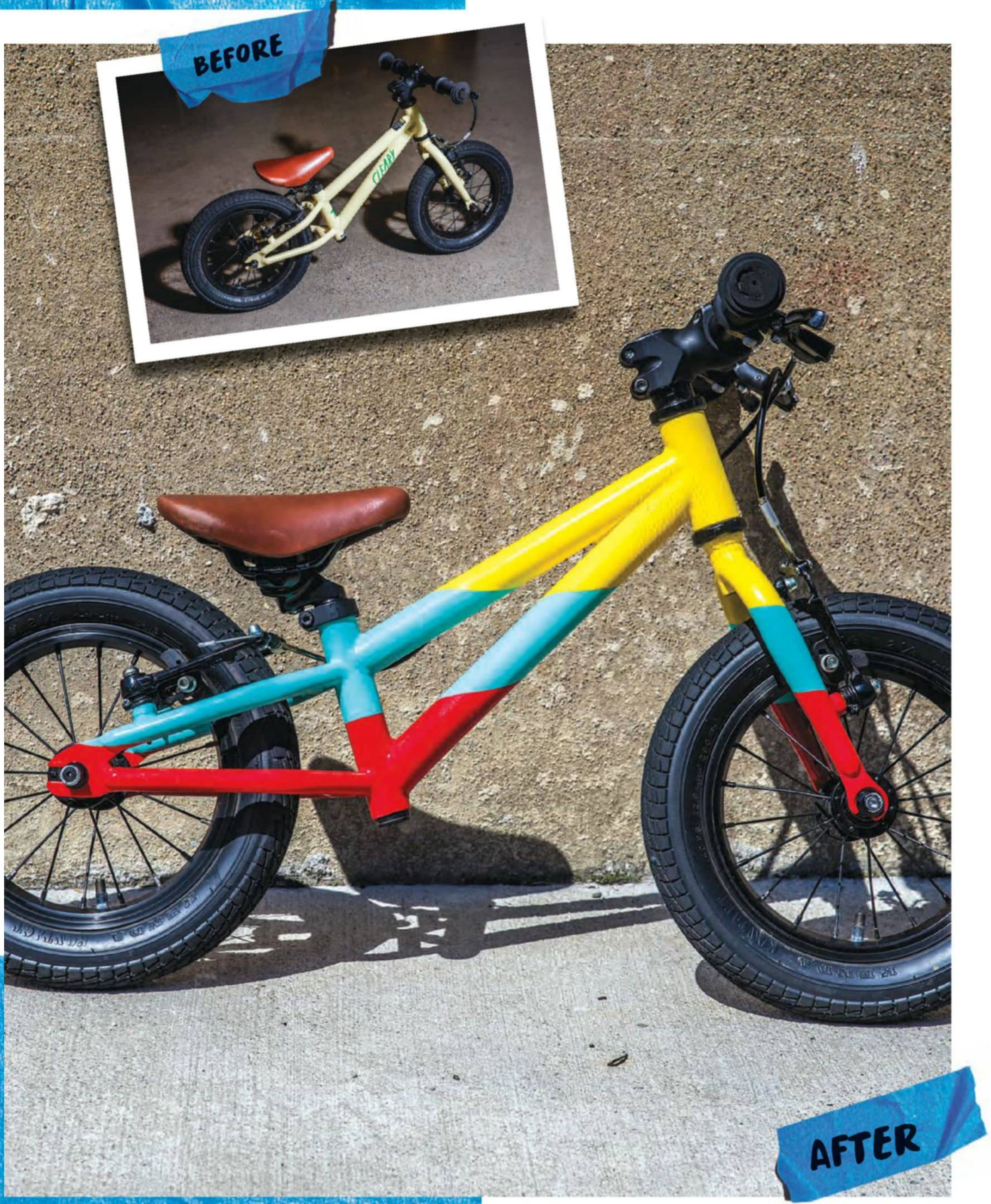
Depending on the paint you use, applying a finishing coat helps protect the paint and makes it last longer. Most brands of paint also sell some kind of varnish finish. These usually come in gloss, semi-gloss and matte varieties to help you achieve the desired finish on your frame.

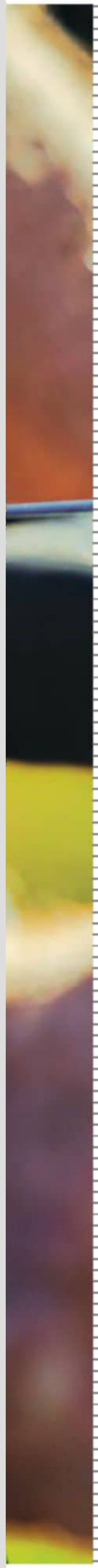
Once the final layer is sprayed, be patient yet again. Allow the finish coat to cure according to manufacturer instructions (or longer).

Lastly, carefully peel away the tape and admire your handiwork. Then, rebuild your bike and show it off to the world. **B**

START SMALL FOR YOUR FIRST PROJECT. A KID'S BIKE CAN BE THE PERFECT CANVAS TO TRY OUT YOUR DIY PAINTING SKILLS.

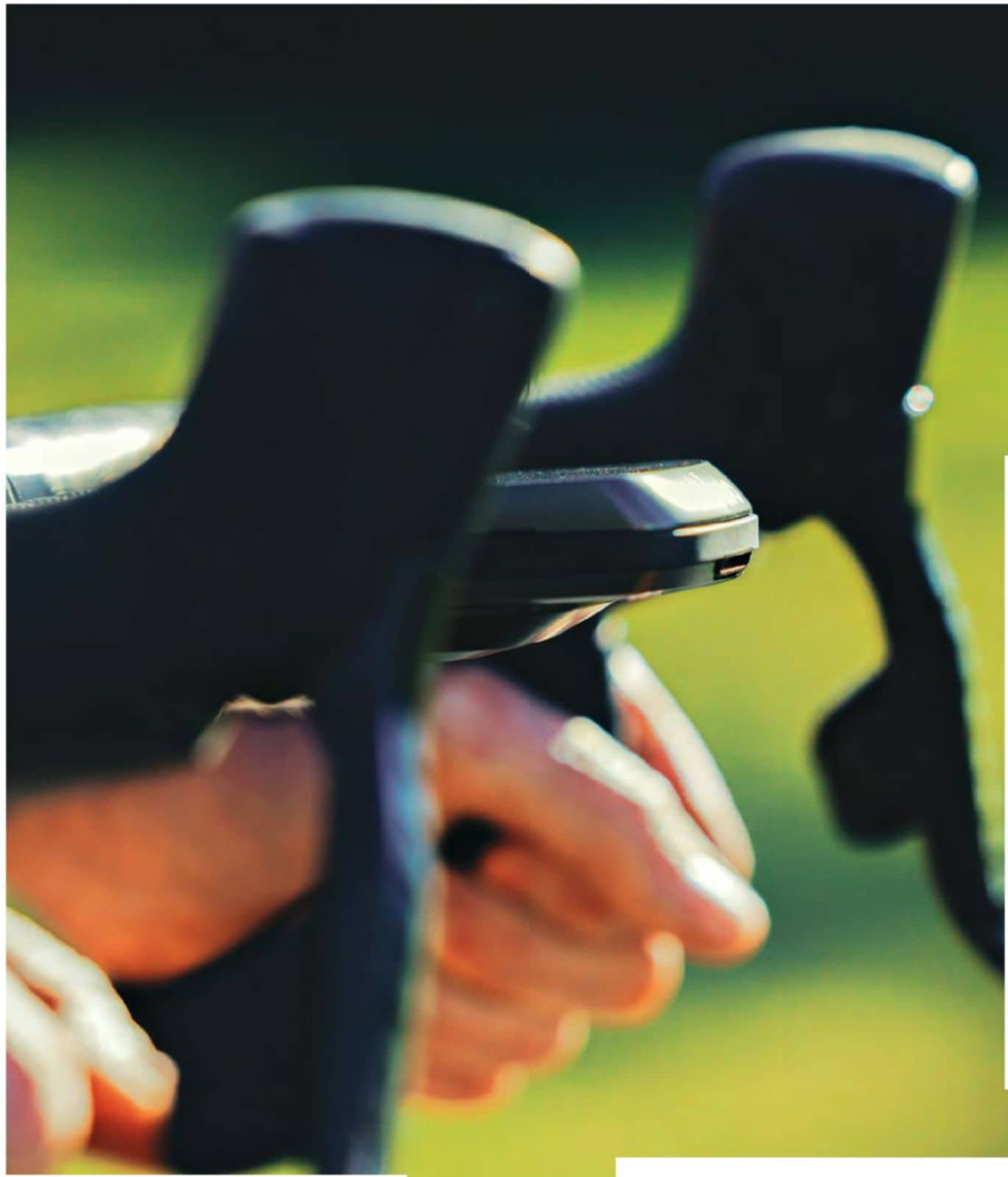






SPOIL YOURSELF THIS ROAD-RACING SEASON WITH TRIED-AND-TESTED PRODUCTS THAT GUARANTEE SPEED, COMFORT AND ENJOYMENT ON THE BIKE.

RACE-DAY UPGRADES



BY JON MINSTER

Images supplied

ICE ICE BABY. NORTHWAVE MIGHT BE A NEW BRAND IN SOUTH AFRICA, BUT THEY'VE BEEN DESIGNING QUALITY CYCLING SHOES IN ITALY SINCE 1993.

HOT KICKS

NORTHWAVE REVOLUTION 3

R4 500 / WWW.DRAGONS.CO.ZA

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE NEW SHOES to make you feel like Tadej Pogačar when you're flying up (and down) your favourite climbs. And if you're going to take the leap and get yourself a new pair, you might as well keep up with the trends and go for white.

Yes, white.

We know black is more practical. We know black is more modest. We *know* black goes with everything. But white is just so darn... cool.

Shoe brands have come a long way since the early 2000s, when white shoes had manky mesh panels that quickly went grey. The newest and best shoes use black for those parts of the shoe and restrict the white to the harder outer shell, where it has less chance of discolouring.

That's the case with these beauties from Northwave, an Italian brand recently available in South Africa through Dragons Sports (the same friendly people who import Giant and Liv). The white outer looks great and is easy to wipe clean, and all the other bits (like the tongue and inner) are black.

Performance-wise, the stiff carbon sole ensures immediate power transfer and the double SLW3 dials work just as well as Boas, maybe even better. And then there's the price, which is very reasonable – especially when you line up the Revolution 3s next to other premium shoes with similar features.

Not convinced? They're also available in black...

BIG FRIENDLY GIANT

WAHOO ELEMNT ACE

R12 999 / WAHOOFITNESS.CO.ZA

THE LATEST CYCLING COMPUTER FROM WAHOO is no wallflower. It announces itself by being absolutely massive – the biggest computer out there, bigger even than Garmin's new Edge 1050 and Hammerhead's latest Karoo. Screen-wise, it offers about the same real estate as an iPhone Mini, but it's substantially thicker than a phone and quite heavy as a result, weighing in at more than 200g.

But don't be put off by the size and weight. Once the device is installed on your handlebar using the very sturdy metal mount, you don't notice the weight, and you can appreciate just how cool it is to have all your data displayed so clearly and legibly on the touchscreen display.

That's the thing about Wahoo – they're famous for simplicity and ease of use. We had no problem setting up the device and customising the data fields. As with their other computers, you must use Wahoo's companion app to do this – a process that was quick and easy.

The Ace is the first Wahoo unit to include workout profiles; in other words, riders can build different data page sets and customise settings for indoor and outdoor riding, mountain biking, gravel, etc. This feature has been available on competitor devices for a while, so it's nice to see Wahoo catching up.

The other positive trade-off of the size of the Ace – besides being able to see your data and navigation pages really easily – is battery life. Wahoo claims it will last for 30 hours and there are plans for firmware updates to increase this even more by allowing users to adjust power-saving features.

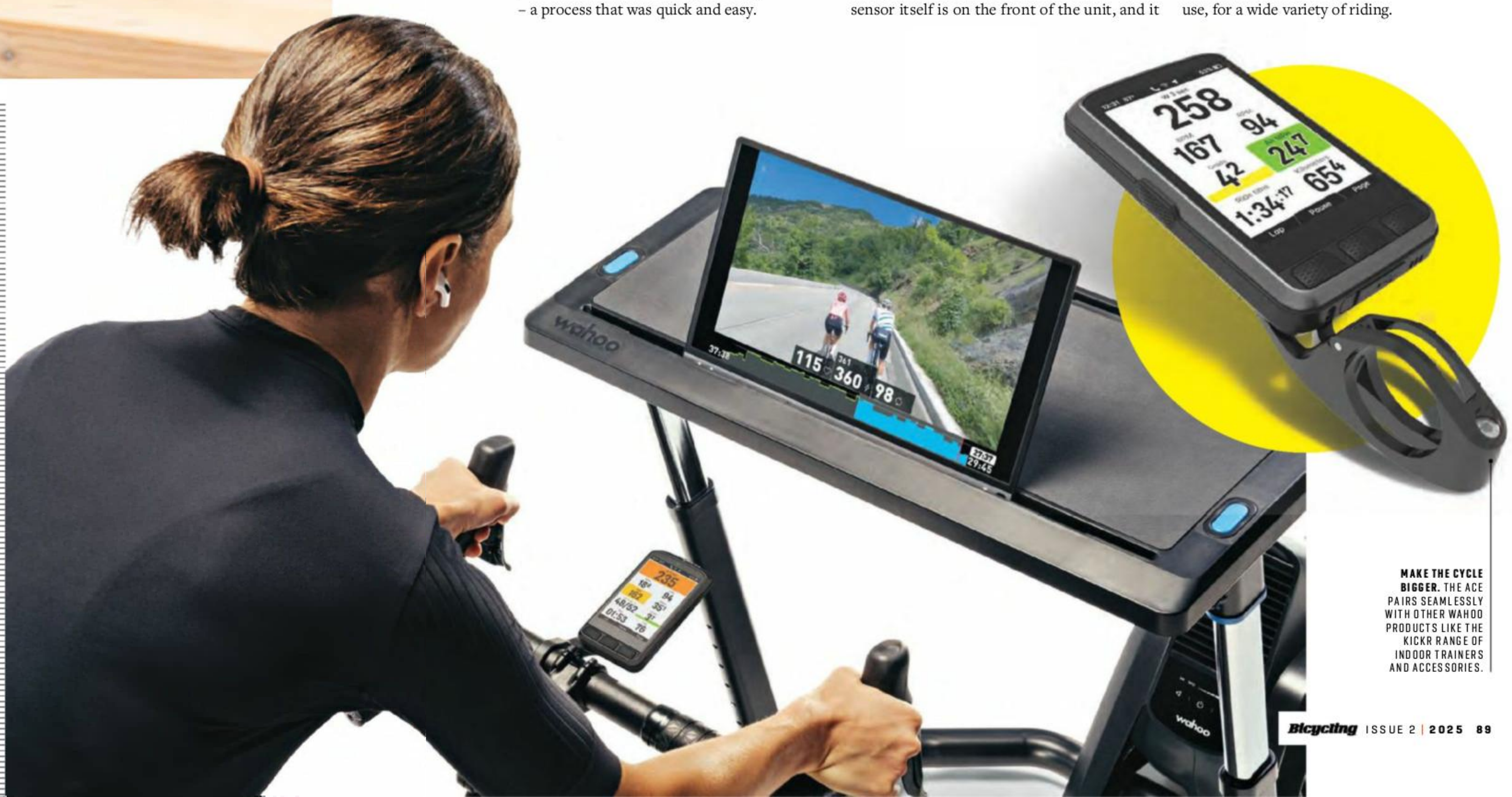
Then there are the two headline features – a wind sensor and a built-in bell. We've seen a digital bell in the Garmin 1050, and this one is just as good. Simply tap the screen while you're riding, and a loud *ting ting* alerts pedestrians and other riders to your presence.

And the wind sensor? The Ace is the first computer to offer this built-in feature. The sensor itself is on the front of the unit, and it measures the wind speed while you ride. You can glance down and see instantly whether you have a headwind or tailwind, and the speed of that wind. Afterwards, on the app, you can get a chart of how you benefited from or were hindered by the wind.

Wahoo claims riders can use wind data to better position themselves in a bunch while riding, but that might be bit of a reach. It's probably not very useful data, but it *is* interesting, and maybe that's enough. After all, who doesn't want the actual numbers to validate their assertion that they rode into a headwind *the entire day?*

So, who is this big daddy of a bike computer aimed at? If you have trouble seeing the small screen of a conventional bike computer, the Ace's monster screen brings welcome relief. Also, if you need extended battery life for very long rides, it's well worth considering. It might not be for the race snakes, but it's a great all-round device that's easy to live with and fun to use, for a wide variety of riding.

IS BIGGER BETTER? YES, IF YOU LIKE YOUR DATA TO BE BOLD AND LEGIBLE, AND IF YOU WANT THE BATTERY TO LAST FOREVER. NO, IF YOU'RE A WEIGHT WEENIE.



MAKE THE CYCLE BIGGER. THE ACE PAIRS SEAMLESSLY WITH OTHER WAHOO PRODUCTS LIKE THE KICKR RANGE OF INDOOR TRAINERS AND ACCESSORIES.

HELMET MUST-HAVES. *THE CIRCUIT TICKS ALL THE BOXES FOR A QUALITY HELMET: EXCELLENT VENTILATION, EASY ADJUSTMENT – AND IT'S SAFE.*

LOOK GOOD, STAY SAFE

TREK CIRCUIT WAVECEL

R3 400 / TREKBIKES.COM

BESIDES BEING STYLISH, this is also one of the safest helmets around. WaveCel – that funky material you can see through the vents – is Trek's answer to Mips and other slip-plane liners. The collapsible cellular structure is designed to address three types of forces: linear impact, rotational impact and angled impact.

When a crash occurs, the WaveCel material flexes, crumples and glides to disperse energy away from the head, significantly reducing the likelihood of a concussion. Trek claims WaveCel is up to 48 times more effective than standard EPS foam in preventing head injuries, backed up by research from Virginia Tech, the preeminent helmet testing lab in the world.

It's not all unicorns and rainbows though – the WaveCel material doesn't allow you to scratch your head through the vents, and you can't stash your sunnies; but we'd take the extra safety over those features any day of the week.

If you're not a fan of white, it's also available in black, red and "power surge" yellow.

palatinose
PLUSSSZ
Electro-Sport
Endurance
20

STAY ON THE PACE

PLUSSSZ ELECTRO-SPORT ENDURANCE

R399 (40 TABS) / TAKEALOT.COM

YOU RIDE, YOU SWEAT, YOU LOSE electrolytes. That's the way it works. But with these effervescent tabs, you can put them all back. Electro-Sport delivers a concentrated dose of essential minerals, including sodium, potassium, magnesium and calcium. It also gives you a quick hit of carbs for a much-needed energy boost.

DRINK LIKE THE PROS

ELITE FLY TEX

R189 / SPORTSMANSWAREHOUSE.CO.ZA

YOU'VE SPENT THOUSANDS ON parts to make your bike as light as possible... and then you use that thick plastic bottle you got for free in your CTCT goodie bag. No! Not only is the free bottle hard to drink from; it's not doing you any favours in the grams department.

This on the other hand is one of the lightest bottles available – the 550ml version weighs only 54g. The super-low weight is achieved by using less plastic, which also ensures the bottle remains easy to squeeze.

BEST LIGHTWEIGHT TOOL

DYNAPLUG RACER PRO

R850 / TAKEALOT.COM

TUBELESS CHANGED THE GAME for mountain bikes, but it wasn't as successful on the road. Until now. The latest generation of sealants and tyres have improved performance to such an extent that you can say goodbye to all those little pinprick punctures that would have ended your ride in the past.

But what about a bigger gash? That's where this masterful little tool comes in. The aluminium body holds four preloaded plugs: three standard plugs with non-abrasive brass tips, and one bigger plug with an aluminium tip for larger punctures. Simply pull the cap off the end of the tool, and plug the tyre. Done.

The whole thing weighs less than 30g – it's substantially smaller and lighter than other repair tools, and will fit easily into your pocket or tool bag. It's a relatively pricey proposition, but it's the fastest, most streamlined repair tool out there, and it works extremely well.

GOODYEAR EAGLE SPORT
TUBE T
700x28

PLUMP UP THE JAM. GOODYEAR EAGLE SPORTS ARE AVAILABLE IN VARIOUS WIDTHS FROM 25MM TO 32MM.

RAD RUBBER

GOODYEAR EAGLE SPORT

R550 PER TYRE / ORIMGLOBAL.CO.ZA

THE EAGLE SPORT IS A TUBE-TYPE clincher tyre that offers exceptional durability and ride quality for the price. Often, cheaper tyres that punt durability are plasticky and dangerous in the wet; but these are surprisingly tacky and have a supple feel, even when pumped to the recommended 7.5 bar (108psi). The tread pattern is uncomplicated, with no unnecessary grooves to trap grit and pieces of glass, and they're also relatively light, weighing around 280g each on our scale.

We've been riding our set for nearly a year, and so far we haven't had a single puncture, despite the usual shrapnel on Cape Town's roads. They inflate a little wider than advertised – our 28s measured 28.36mm on a set of Fulcrum rims; something to bear in mind if you have tight clearance in your frame. Luckily, they're available in a range of widths – from 25mm to 32mm, with tan or black sidewalls – to suit any bike, whether it has disc brakes and lots of clearance, or rim brakes and minimal clearance.

Some competitors are selling tyres for more than R2 000 each, and they often wear out after one season. Of course, a racing compound will benefit certain riders; but if you don't have a team car following with spare wheels, and you want your tyres to last, these are an excellent choice.

FIND THE RIGHT WIDTH. SPECIALIZED ROVAL RAPIDE BARS ARE AVAILABLE IN FOUR DIFFERENT SIZES, FROM SLINKY 38CM TO GENEROUS 44CM.

GO LONG. THE ALPINIST SEAT POST HAS A 12MM OFFSET AND COMES IN TWO LENGTHS: 300MM AND 360MM.

TOUCH POINTS MATTER.
YOUR SEAT AND BARS ARE KEY AREAS ON YOUR BIKE. THE MORE COMFORTABLE YOU ARE, THE FASTER YOU'LL RIDE.

CARBON WHERE IT COUNTS

SPECIALIZED ROVAL RAPIDE HANDLEBAR AND ALPINIST SEAT POST

R5 900 (BARS) / R2 200 (SEAT POST) / SPECIALIZED.COM

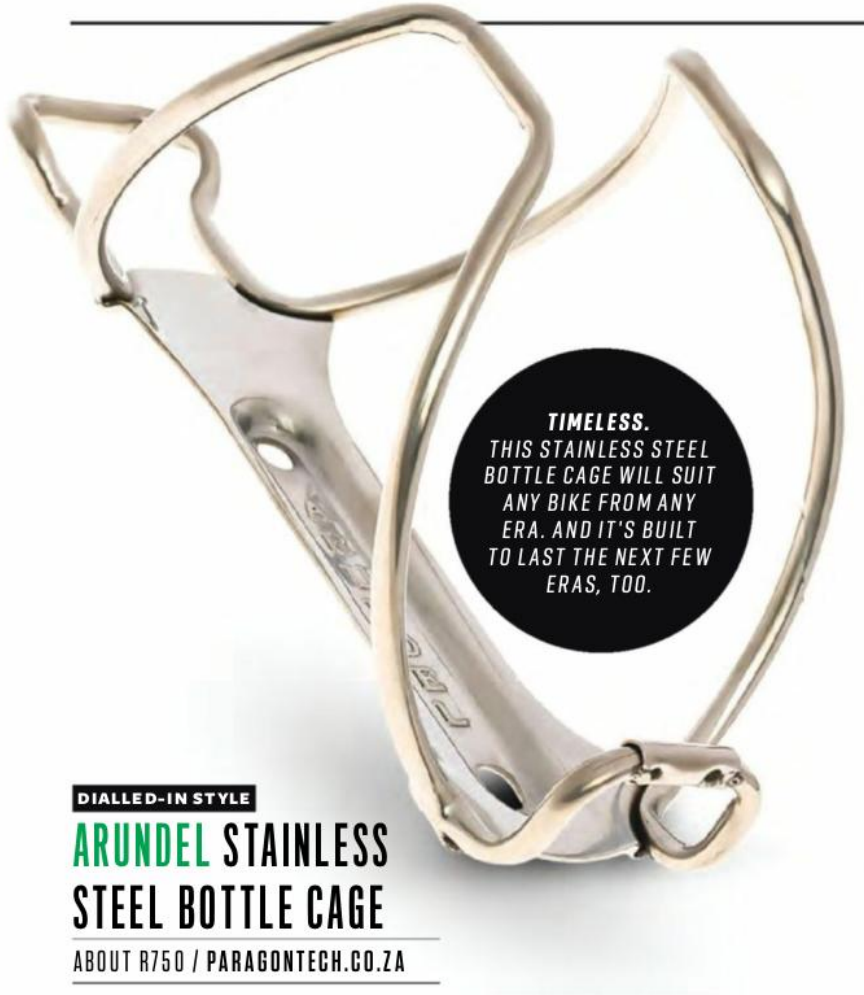
▲ **DO YOU RIDE AN ALUMINIUM- OR STEEL-FRAME** bike? Or maybe even a cheaper carbon bike with alloy parts?

Most riders looking to shave weight and improve performance will go straight to carbon wheels, but upgrading your handlebar and seat post will also do wonders in this regard. Carbon bars are not only substantially lighter than aluminium bars, they also absorb road chatter better, reducing fatigue and improving handling. In addition, carbon can be formed into weird and wonderful shapes, allowing for better aerodynamics.

Take these Roval Rapide bars from Specialized, for example. With aero engineered flattened tops that feature a textured surface for your hands, and weighing only 225g (size 42), they offer an instant style and speed upgrade. Likewise, the 27.2mm round Alpinist seat post, which should fit any standard frame: it weighs a ridiculous 136g and offers far more compliance than a rigid alloy post.

Just a quick caveat about carbon: it's less resistant to impacts, and can crack or fail under certain conditions. We'd trust these Specialized products at 70km/h down Chapman's Peak, but there's a slew of knock-offs available from Chinese sites like Temu that might not be as safe. Hashtag just saying.

CLEVER CLAMP. THOSE RED THINGS ARE INTEGRATED TYRE LEVERS, WHICH SLIDE IN BELOW THE SEAT RAIL CLAMP.



TIMELESS. *THIS STAINLESS STEEL BOTTLE CAGE WILL SUIT ANY BIKE FROM ANY ERA. AND IT'S BUILT TO LAST THE NEXT FEW ERAS, TOO.*

DIALLED-IN STYLE

ARUNDEL STAINLESS STEEL BOTTLE CAGE

ABOUT R750 / PARAGONTECH.CO.ZA

▲ **THIS CLASSY CAGE** will lend a touch of elegance to any bike. But it's not just for looks: made from 4.2mm stainless steel tubing and built to hold bottles tight on the roughest roads, it's the kind of cage you keep for life and transfer from one bike to the next. According to Texas-based Arundel, the cage has been used on bikes in the Tour de France, at the Ronde van Vlaanderen and at Paris-Roubaix.

It might be slightly heavier than a carbon cage, but it will never crack or mark your bottles, and you'll get plenty of approving nods from those in the know...

BEST TOOL BAG

SCICON SOFT 350 RL 2.1 SADDLE BAG

R265 / ZA.SCICONSPORTS.COM

◀ **A SADDLE BAG SHOULD HOLD** your puncture-repair essentials, and nothing else. It should be compact and unobtrusive, and it shouldn't wobble or rattle as you ride.

The SCICON Soft 350 RL 2.1 ticks all those boxes. Its 0.5-litre capacity can accommodate a spare tube, multi-tool, a couple of CO2 canisters and the canister adaptor. If you're riding tubeless, you can also fit a slim plug tool (like the Dynaplug Racer Pro, also featured in these pages). A cool design feature is the pair of integrated tyre levers, which slide into their holder just below the saddle mount.

Talking about that mount... It clamps onto your seatpost rails and is easy to install. It's also easy to quickly pop the bag off if you need something. Winning.

NEW BAR TAPE, NEW YOU

There's nothing like fresh bar tape to make your bike look and feel brand spanking new. Here are three good options.

[redacted]

FOR FLAIR

SUPACAZ SUPER STICKY CUSH

R999 / cyclelab.co.za

■ **THIS FANCY 3MM WRAP** feels right at home on any road bike. It's made from polyurethane and it's expensive, but it's one of the longer-lasting tapes we've tested. It stays grippy even when your hands are sweating mid-race, and that 'cushy' underlayer absorbs road buzz nicely. It's available in an assortment of colours and styles, so you'll find something to match your vibe. Added bonus: it comes with screw-in aluminium bar plugs.

FOR LONGEVITY

FIZIK TEMPO MICROTEX BONDCUSH CLASSIC

R495 / evobikes.co.za

■ **THIS TAPE, MADE FROM** synthetic Microtex fabric bonded to polymer foam, is only 2mm thick, which means it's super-easy to wrap. (It comes with some extra length, too, in case you make a mistake.) It's comfortable and durable and doesn't tear easily, even over a couple of seasons of heavy riding. It also has a nice matte finish that soaks up moisture. If you want to reduce road buzz, there's a 3mm 'soft' version, which boasts similar longevity and some extra comfort.

FOR COMFORT

LIZARDSKINS DSP

R480 / cyclelab.co.za

■ **WE TESTED THE 3.2MM** version of this tape, made from so-called 'durasoft polymer' (DSP, get it?) and it was a dream, especially on rough roads. There's slightly more padding than on regular tape, which might feel like overkill on smooth stretches of pavement; but over the course of a long race – or on your gravel bike – it will spare you numb digits and shoulder ache. The DSP material feels grippy and secure, even in the wet.

ELVES
EVO FALATH

NAILED IT. ELVES THUNDER HAMMERS ARE WORTHY OF THOR HIMSELF.

GO BLING OR GO HOME

ELVES OROME VALAR TH50D WHEELS

R20 999 / ELVESBIKESOUTHAFRICA.CO.ZA

▲ **THE BIGGEST SPEED BOOST** you can give to your bike is to upgrade the wheels. Deep-section carbon rims on ceramic hubs paired with fast-rolling tubeless tyres will turn your steed into a rocket ship.

How do they work? Well, the deep rims create a more streamlined shape, reducing air resistance. They minimise turbulent airflow around the wheels, allowing you to maintain speed with less effort.

At higher speeds, especially, deeper wheels significantly reduce drag compared to shallow rims. The added mass in the rim also creates a flywheel effect, helping you maintain speed with less effort. Not to mention how stiff they are, which improves acceleration.

Elves is a Taiwanese direct-to-consumer bike company that makes insanely technical carbon frames. Run by a group of self-proclaimed bike nerds, they're obsessed with quality and performance – and with looks. Their bikes are as distinctive as they are speedy, and so are their wheels.

These 50mm beauties ('TH' stands for 'Thunder Hammer', as it should) employ something called 'zero-coating design', which showcases the fine fibre structure of the carbon, giving each wheel a unique look while reducing weight. Laced to star-ratchet hubs with ceramic bearings, a set weighs about 1 400g.

They gleam in the sunlight and shimmer when they spin, giving your bike a speed and style upgrade for the ages. And guess what? There's even a rim-brake version...

FREE SPEED

SHIMANO HG901 CHAIN

R990 / BIKE-ADDICT.CO.ZA

▼ **WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE:** you take your bike in for a service before the Cape Town Cycle Tour, and the mechanic calls later to tell you that you should replace your chain. And you should do it now, because if you wait any longer then you'll have to replace your chain rings and cassette, too.

But it's such a grudge purchase. I mean, a chain isn't a shiny new handlebar or a fast-shifting groupset. It's just a chain.

Or is it? This is Shimano's premium 11-speed chain, often nicknamed the Dura-Ace chain to distinguish it from the cheaper 'Ultegra' (HG701) and '105' (HG601) chains. The reason it costs more is because it has hollow pins, which makes it lighter (not by much, but it's always a bonus on a road bike); and it shifts faster and more smoothly.

When I replaced my chain two years ago, Nils Hansen from Woodstock Cycleworks in Cape Town recommended this chain, and it's been a pleasure to ride with. I've done nearly 3 000km on it, and I'm hoping to get 3 000 more. – *Jon Minster*

CIOVITA
CIOVITA
Bicycling EDITOR'S CHOICE

FASTEST JERSEY

CIOVITA APEX H1 PRO FIT JERSEY

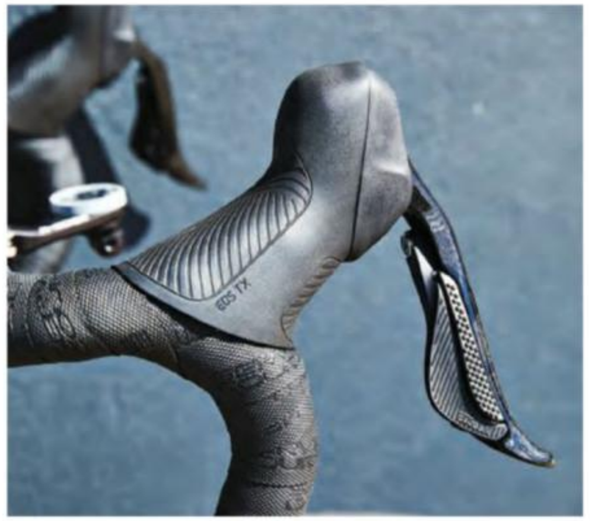
R1 999 / CIOVITA.CO.ZA

▶ **SOUTH AFRICAN APPAREL BRAND** CIOVITA has made massive global strides in recent years – they're now competing with the best of the best from Europe and elsewhere. Much of the drive to develop pro-level kit has come from being the sponsor for the Epic mountain bike series: every day, the leader dons a special Apex H1 jersey, like this one.

It's a serious racing garment made from something called '3D nanotech fabric', which is highly breathable and weighs next to nothing. It also has articulated sleeves, a body-hugging fit, a seamless front hem, reflective trim and stabilised pockets, so that nothing you stash in there slides around on your back.

Befitting such a no-nonsense top is the flattering, single-colour design that pairs well with any bibs. The women's range is available in navy, white, pink, 'air' (pale lilac) and red. There's also a men's version.

LOGIC
RITCHEY



ELECTRONIC SHIFTING FOR ALL

WHEELTOP EDS-TX

R19 229 (WITH HYDRAULIC BRAKES) / **RAPIDE.CO.ZA**

ELECTRONIC SHIFTING WORKS INCREDIBLY well and has become the standard for performance bikes, but the electronic options from the so-called 'big three' – SRAM, Shimano and Campagnolo – can be prohibitively expensive, even at the low end.

Enter the Chinese company WheelTop and its EDX-TX groupset, which is not only cheaper than the cheapest SRAM and Shimano but also does something that no other electronic drivetrain currently offers: it's compatible with any cassette, from three-speed to 14-speed. There's even a rim-brake version. Essentially, they did something that other brands seem unwilling or unable to accomplish – make their parts backwards- and forwards-compatible.

Because of this, EDS-TX isn't sold as a complete groupset. It's sold as a 'drivetrain upgrade' with shifters and derailleurs, and brake callipers and hoses if applicable. Riders can use whatever crank, chain and cassette they want.

The full kit with hydraulic brakes costs R19 229 and the rim-brake version is even less. Compare that to R30k+ for Shimano 105 Di2 or SRAM Rival AXS.

For the weight weenie reading, we weighed all three of these 'kits' and found that Rival AXS was the lightest, with an actual weight for our parts of 1 294g. Shimano 105 Di2 was heaviest at 1 323g, and WheelTop wasn't far behind SRAM at 1 304g.

If you're wondering if EDS-TX will be compatible with your bike, the answer is most likely yes. According to WheelTop, the rear derailleur accepts a 10- or 11-tooth small cog and up to a 36-tooth large cog. The front derailleur is rated for a maximum of a 16-tooth jump between chainrings, which should handle the majority of road gearing set-ups.

When setting up the groupset on a new bike, the WheelTop app asks you to select the number of gears in your cassette. Each gear slot can be individually fine-tuned to overcome spacing variances between brands and eras. It's so brilliant and simple, it makes me genuinely mad that no one else has done it yet.

As exciting as broad compatibility is, it would be worth nothing if the group didn't work.

Fortunately, the shifting of EDS-TX is rock solid. The reliability and smoothness of the derailleurs are right up there with the mainstream brands – maybe not quite as good as Rival AXS or 105 Di2, but the performance gap is hardly a game changer, especially considering the price differential.

THAT'S THE GOOD STUFF; WHAT ABOUT THE NEGATIVES? Well, there are no secondary shift or accessory buttons on the shifters, and there's no option to add satellite shifter buttons.

By modern standards, the levers themselves are relatively small. This could be good for riders with smaller hands or those who prefer smaller hood shapes of past groupsets, but it does feel a bit weird if you're used to the longer and roomier modern hoods from SRAM and Shimano.

My biggest gripe, however, is the rubber used for the hoods – it's hard and stiff, and you'll have a tough time prying it up to adjust or install the levers. The hoods are the primary touch point for a rider's hands; hopefully WheelTop will address this issue by adjusting the compound in future batches, and then making the new hoods available to people who've already bought the group.

I'm also not a huge fan of permanently integrating the batteries into the front and rear derailleurs either. I suspect this solution was used to skirt existing patents from SRAM and Shimano, but it's the worst of both systems and has no real advantage. I can live with it from a day-to-day perspective, but it does raise longevity concerns, as it's impossible to replace a faulty or dead battery without replacing the whole derailleur.

> BZZT, BZZT. WHEELTOP EDS-TX PROVES THAT YOU DON'T NEED TO SPEND A FORTUNE ON ELECTRONIC SHIFTING.

THE PARTS MIGHT LOOK AND FEEL A BIT CHEAP, but EDS-TX is still the most cost-effective way to upgrade your bike to electronic shifting, especially if you currently own a bike with a crank set, cassette and chain in good working order. If that bike has rim brakes, EDS-TX is more or less your only easy-to-get option. And if your bike has fewer than ten gears, it's the only game in town.

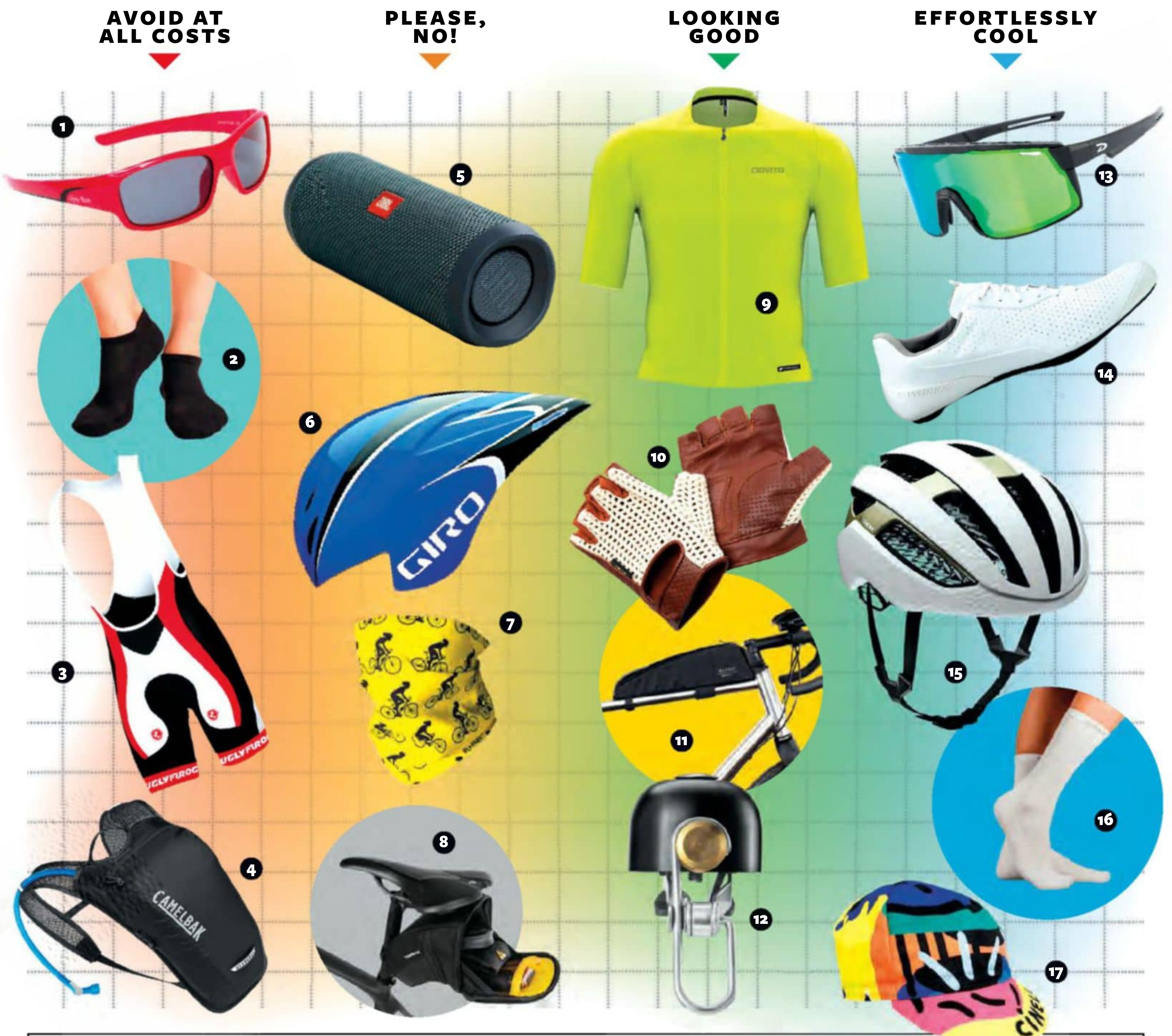
In offering cross-compatibility, WheelTop has cracked the door in a way that makes the question of why such features aren't available from SRAM and Shimano impossible to ignore.

It would be remiss not to mention that WheelTop recently purchased a majority stake in Rotor – a move that probably points to the Chinese company's bigger plans to play at the higher end of the component market. I expect them to offer a complete groupset with cranks, chainrings and cassettes soon, as these are all parts that Rotor already makes to very high standards.

In short, Wheeltop's road-bike groupset offers a compelling value proposition, and has features that aren't yet available from the big three component makers. The good news for dirt-road riders is that there are gravel- and mountain-bike options too. *– Dan Chabanov* **B**

HOT OR NOT?

THE CAPE TOWN CYCLE TOUR ISN'T ABOUT BREAKING THREE HOURS. (OR FOUR. OR... MORE.) NO – IT'S YOUR CHANCE TO SHOW OFF YOUR STYLE AT SOUTH AFRICA'S BIGGEST GATHERING OF TIGHT PANTS AND SHAVED LEGS! EVALUATE YOUR WARDROBE AND ACCESSORIES USING OUR HANDY COOLNESS GRID BEFORE YOU *FAUX PAS* YOUR WAY INTO AN EPIC FAIL TIKTOK.



Key **1.** Wrap-around sunnies from 2002. Oof. **2.** Anklet socks. The horror. **3.** So-worn-they're-see-through bib shorts with unflattering crotch branding. **4.** Hydration pack. Save it for mountain biking, dude. **5.** Bluetooth speaker. Don't be *that* person. **6.** TT helmet. Are you Filippo Ganna? No, you are not. **7.** Tube scarf. Useful... but ugly. **8.** Giant dangling saddle bag (see #7). **9.** Minimalist jersey in a happy colour. Niiice. **10.** Vintage mesh gloves. Timeless. We're getting there... **11.** Sleek top-tube bag. Now we're talking. **12.** Bell. Ding ding! **13.** Wide-coverage glasses. To protect your eyes, of course. Okay, and your image. **14.** White lace-up shoes (swoon). **15.** White helmet. Cooler than black – literally and figuratively. **16.** Mid-calf socks (but do it right, please). **17.** Casquette. Yeah boy! (And remember to plump it up for maximum *luft* in the beer tent afterwards.)

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